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Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

IN a *Meet the Author* sketch we remarked that Crawford Sullivan was so reticent about himself that we wished Tug Raffin, President of the Bilge and Binnacle Club, would do us a word picture of his creator. Well, we certainly meant it, but we were just a bit surprised to receive a prompt response from Mr. Raffin—a frank and revealing character study which was undoubtedly written in the back room of Istvan Karamoz's Saloon.

Delighted as we are with Tug Raffin's letter, we have an uneasy suspicion that it may mark a dangerous trend. It may give the boys ideas, and they are not all as genteel as Tug. For instance, it frightens us to consider what would happen if Omega took it into his extraordinary head to write an analysis of the mind and character of William Gray Beyer. Mr. Beyer might be compelled to retire from active life. Again, we can see Cleve and d'Entreville snickering together as they pinion Murray Montgomery in mordant verse.

Moreover, it's not merely a matter of scurrilous letters to the editor. Most of these characters are a little on the wild side, and if they get the idea that they can talk back to their creators, the results may very well be chaotic. We can foresee pranks of all sorts and outright disobedience. Now if Bottlenose Billings, carried away by the spirit of a Bilge and Binnacle free-for-all, were to start jumping up and down on Crawford Sullivan . . . Frankly we don't like the look of things.

Anyway, here is Tug Raffin's informative letter.

TUG RAFFIN

I have just finished reading in your magazine that you would like for me sometime to write a story about this bird Crawford Sullivan. Right here and now I wish to tell you it would not be worth while. Just for the record, however, I will herewith present a few sidelights on the guy so you can see what I mean.

It is easy for me to understand why Sullivan didn't give you more of an autobiography about himself. He is the kind of egg who prefers to sit around quietly, dragging information out of other people. He is always asking questions and leading you on to talk about yourself, and you think he is a nice fellow until one day you find yourself portrayed in one of those screwball stories he writes.

He is not exactly shy, for I have seen him fraternizing with characters that I personally would not associate with outside of a patrol wagon. Furthermore, he knows lots of yarns about those nights in the fo'c'sle, but, chances are, he will not put them on paper unless somebody pays him for them, so much per word. His nickname, incidentally, is Jake.

His appearance, while not entirely repulsive, is somewhat on the minus side. A lady passenger on the old R. M. S. *Niagara* once mistook him for a missionary until she spotted him in the crew's quarters bellowing *McSorley's Twins* with a very tough A.B. named Pat Flannigan, who was performing an Irish jig.

It is true that Sullivan was once a seaman, but I don't think he was a very good one. I know of one occasion when the bosun sent him 'tween decks to stack dunnage, and he spent the whole day down there reading a stack of ARGOSYS under a cluster light. Every time he heard footsteps on deck he would pick up a few hunks of lumber and heave them against the bulkhead to make the bosun think he was hard at work. If the merchant marine had many sailors like Sullivan, they would have to ban ARGOSY from their ships.

Then there was another time—

But here I am writing a story about the guy.

Bilge & Binnacle Club.

THE discussion of Mr. Maxwell's art work seems to have turned into a minor conflict, and voices are being raised sharply. That's all right as long as nobody gets mad, and the lady below says she isn't.

JOANNA HODES

Well, here I am again. Gee, I'm sorry—I had intended my next letter to be a nice one, but here it is, just full of invective. Not necessarily for you, though. It's for those two people, Mr. Connor and Miss Chaffin.

That sure wasn't a very nice remark Miss Chaffin made about me. No, I'm not mad; I just want to explain. Miss Chaffin, maybe I don't know art, and maybe I should take an art-appreciation course, *but* I *do* like to see the characters, and I can't see Mr. Maxwell's. So, as one gal to another—"Fooey," with a capital F!

Now, Mr. Connor, I start on you. What kind of a he-man are you, that you can't stand six-guns? Others like them, so don't be selfish. I know too many of them get into most people's hair, but don't entirely condemn them. I agree with you about the fantastic stories, but I'll hate you forever (don't take that too seriously) for what you said about Cleve and d'Entreville, my heroes—that you didn't like them as well as that Robin the Bombardier person.

And about serials: Mr. Connor, maybe you have a lot of spare time and nothing on your mind, so you can read those six-parters and keep all the installment endings in your head. But I go to high school and it's well nigh impossible to keep geometry, etc., in mind, plus five or six serials.

Well, I've about run dry, so I'll say "goo'bye" and leave you in peace. ("Ah, at last!" you say.) I'm sorry my letter is so long—I didn't have time to write a short one.

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As told to Robert Carse

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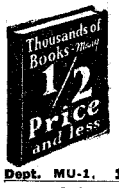

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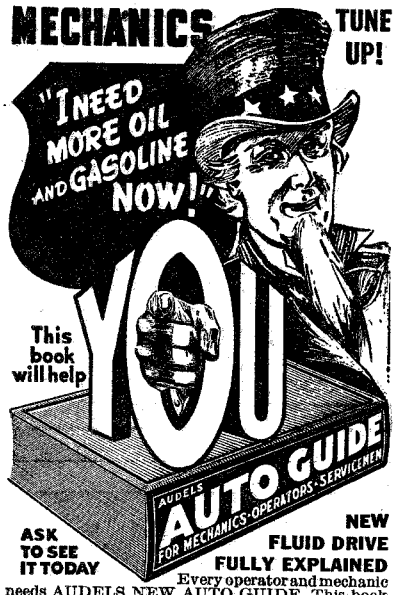

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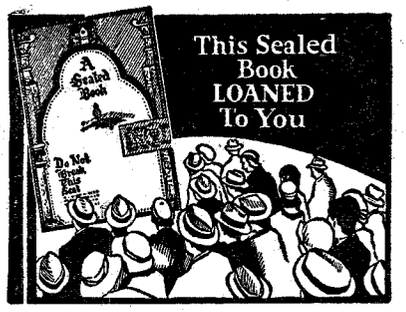

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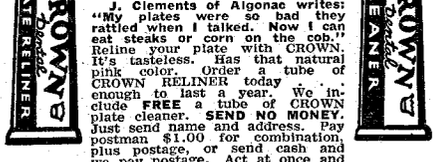

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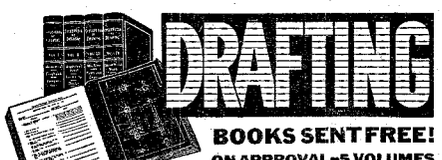

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ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 312 | CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER 27, 1941 | Number 1

COMING SOON

Two years ago ARGOSY published a novel called "Bugles Are for Soldiers"; and in a few weeks Charles Marquis Warren had become one of the most widely acclaimed writers ever to appear in this magazine. His story of Indian fighting in the frontier West had made ARGOSY history.

Now Mr. Warren returns to that same period and background; he writes again of the heroic cavalrymen who tamed a savage land. He tells so vivid and powerful a story of battle on the plains that he surpasses "Bugles Are for Soldiers" in his new novel

ONLY THE VALIANT

Argosy's Blue-Ribbon historical novel for 1942

By CHARLES MARQUIS WARREN

Beginning in the January 24th issue

On Sale December 24th

SHOOT FIRST—OUR NAVY IS READY!—*Argosy's Blue-Ribbon Feature* . . . . . **Corey Beckwith** 6

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This magazine is on sale every other Wednesday

A RED STAR *Magazine*

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher, 280 Broadway, NEW YORK, N. Y.

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Sold First Story 4 Months Before Completing Course

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SO many people with the "germ" of writing in them simply can't get started. They suffer from inertia. Or they set up imaginary barriers to taking the first step.

Many are convinced the field is confined to persons gifted with a genius for writing.

Few realize that the great bulk of commercial writing is done by so-called "unknowns."

Not only do these thousands of men and women produce most of the fiction published, but countless articles on business affairs, social matters, domestic science, etc., as well.

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Shoot First—Our Navy Is Ready!

International News Photo

The President's terse order served warning that Uncle Sam will strike fast and hard, should undersea pirates dare to invade our waters. Yes, the U. S. Navy is ready for action; and here is proof—a thrilling picture of our sea power's ability to hunt subs by a man who knows the Navy from the inside

By Corey Beckwith

YOU are a reporter by training, a writer by profession, and a student of naval affairs by avocation. What's more, you're lucky enough to spend a week somewhere off the Atlantic coast with a portion of the Atlantic Fleet. The schedule goes like this:

Monday and Tuesday—aboard submarine.
Wednesday—aboard Navy blimp.
Thursday—aboard submarine rescue and salvage vessel.
Friday—aboard submarine rescue chamber for actual operation.

You come away from the naval base with the firm conviction that ship for ship, gun for gun, and man for man, there is no fighting force anywhere in the world to equal the United States Navy. And you know now, that should Nazi submarines or any other Axis warships appear in United States waters, the Navy is ready to take care of them. . . .

The submarines lie in a row, black-hulled and ominous in the gray of dawn, moored to their tender. You walk across a gangway, and over the duckboards of a pigboat that is charging her batteries while on the surface, her Diesel exhausts throwing plumes of spray. The next boat is the one to which you have been assigned; you climb to the tiny bridge and look straight down into her control room.

A khaki-clad junior-grade lieutenant welcomes you with the Navy's traditional greeting: "Glad to see you aboard, sir!" You descend, and feel slightly in the way amid what is at first a confusing maze of gadgets—levers, dials, valves and wheels. This control room is the brain center and the heart of the boat.

A little later, and the submarine has cast off her moorings and is standing down the channel, running on her Diesels. You go back to the bridge to watch. Ahead and astern are other submarines; farther out toward the open sea sleek gray destroyers are steaming proudly, and yonder is a bulky tender which is to serve today as a target ship.

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You remark upon the beautiful lines of the destroyers.

"Oh, they're pretty ships, all right," agrees the young officer on the bridge. "But dangerous, in time of war."

"More so than submarines?" you ask.

He looks surprised. "Submarines aren't dangerous! We can always dive in time. We can hide, and then get in a couple of torpedo shots, and it's all over. You'll see."

Morale is like that everywhere in the Navy; whatever ship you're on is the best damned ship afloat, and don't you forget it. But morale is particularly high in the pigboats. Mostly, their crews are picked men, trained at the Submarine School, men who have proven themselves capable of quick, cool thinking and acting in any emergency.

Thousands of men ship over for the pigboats. They draw extra pay for this duty. Submarines have the reputation of feeding their crews better than any other ship, and this in a Navy noted the world over for the high standard of its food.

But it isn't either of those items which makes a man once a pigboat sailor always a pigboat sailor. It's the pride of service, the joy of seeing jobs well done, and helping to do them that way.

THE job is beginning now. The last landmark has been lost in the shore haze, and the sea rolls limitless and blue, with whitecaps kicking across the swells. The destroyers are out of sight, and so is the target ship.

The captain comes to the bridge. He is a lieutenant, and very young—submarines are a young man's game—and he is handsome enough to have stepped off a Hollywood studio set. He ascertains position and heading from the officer of the deck, and looks pleased as he surveys the sea.

"Nice day for periscope observations," he says. "Not too rough, so that you have to put a couple of yards of the scope out of the water. Just enough whitecaps to hide the feather."

Then he looks at his watch, and issues the command which makes the entire boat a beehive of activity:

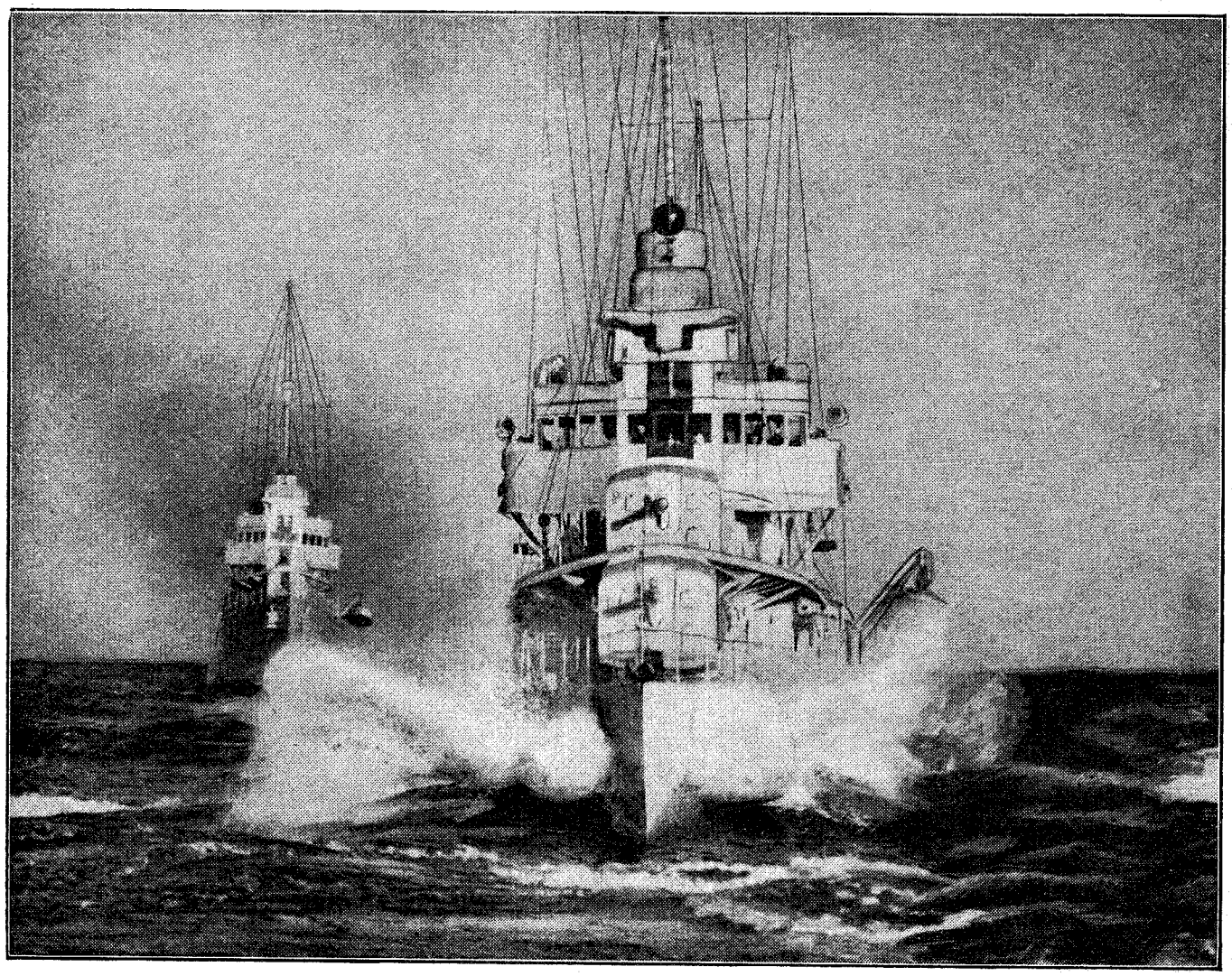
"Rig for diving!"

The bridge is cleared of charts, binoculars and all other loose gear. The searchlight is unrigged and taken below. Last to come down are the commission pennant and the colors. And at the last minute, there comes a regulation growl from the executive officer, who has discovered a three-inch length of tape fluttering from the radio antennae.

"Get up there and cut off that Irish pennant!" he tells a quartermaster. Even a pigboat prides herself on being smart.

Reports come from below. "Stern planes rigged for diving." "Bow planes rigged for diving!" "Control shifted to control room—bridge has the conn!"

Everything is ready now. Vents have been tested. There is plenty of air in the tanks. Aft, in the engine room, the watch is ready to shift to the motors.



U. S. destroyers, on the job policing the seas

International News Photo

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The warning growler sounds throughout the boat. You scurry down the ladder. The hatch clangs shut behind the last man; he dogs it securely with a mallet. The deck slants slightly forward, and the eyeports in the conning tower go awash. You notice a slight but not uncomfortable pressure against your eardrums. Without pressure in the boat, the dive would not be made—lack of pressure indicates a leak somewhere.

You stand on the deck of the crowded control room and watch the depth-gauge needle swing to the right. In no time at all it shows eighty feet.

The electric motors are humming sweetly; air hisses and water gurgles and rumbles as ballast is shifted. The trim of the boat is perfectly maintained, although the shifting of five hundred pounds from fore to aft must be compensated for. The diving officer keeps an unrelaxed vigil over depth gauges, pressure dials and the like; he fires a constant barrage of orders to pump from one tank to another, or to blow from main ballast into the sea.

The captain is working at the mooring board, figuring with mathematical nicety an underwater course that will bring him to the vicinity of the target ship at the proper time. From the loud speaker on the overhead, the men handling the sound apparatus report:

"Screw bearing zero three five, sir. Sounds like a destroyer."

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HOOKS HOLD BELL TO SUB ADJUSTED BY DIVERS
DECK OF SUBMARINE
WATER-TIGHT ESCAPE CHAMBER IN SUB
WATER IN SUB.

International News Photo

Rescue on the ocean floor—a diagram explaining how the diving bell works

THE captain orders a change of course. You can see the boyish excitement in his eyes, but nothing in his voice betrays it. That destroyer and the other destroyers on the surface are hunting this submarine with their own sound apparatus. If they are able to get directly above, they simulate dropping a depth charge and send a sound message that ends the game so far as the submarine is concerned. On the other hand, if the sub can elude them. . .

"Screw beat growing fainter, sir!"

The captain smiles. That means he stands a chance of penetrating the destroyer screen and getting a crack at the target ship. For ten or fifteen minutes more, just to make sure, the pigboat twists and gropes and turns.

"Take her up to periscope depth!"

The diving officer issues commands. You see the needles of the depth gauges swing left as ballast is blown.

"Up periscope!"

The captain hooks both arms over the periscope handles, and walks the scope around. A tiny beam of daylight from the lens produces a startling effect as it shines against his eyeball.

"One destroyer—two destroyers!" he murmurs, and walks around farther. "Ah—there she is! What's our heading?"

The helmsman sings out, and the captain takes a quick bearing. It would be dangerous to leave this tell-tale periscope snaking through the water for very long.

"Eighty feet!" the captain orders. "Man the torpedo tubes!"

"Torpedo tubes manned, sir!" comes the answer through the loud speaker.

"Eighty feet, sir!" reports the diving officer.

"Keep the bearings coming there, men!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

Now there is another officer and a quartermaster at the mooring board. With every report from the sound apparatus, with a stop-watch going, and with speed and heading translated into time and distance, the submarine is closing for the kill.

"Torpedo room!"

"Torpedo room, aye!"

"Fire on three four four!"

There is a smoke bomb being readied. A tense minute passes. The boat is turning, bringing her deadly snouts to bear on the target. All this is cold, precise mathematics; it is navigation, piloting and ordnance combined. And it is strategy perfected by that wiliest of craft—the submarine.

The bow lurches slightly—once—twice. The torpedoes are on their way. The smoke bomb is set off to rocket above the sea as a triumphant signal that the destroyer screen has been evaded, the target ship theoretically sunk. Those are practice torpedoes, of course; they will be chased down now by the same destroyers and recovered before another submarine starts her run.

The skipper orders another smoke bomb of a different color, a little later. It means the sub is going to surface in a few minutes; craft above are warned to keep clear. When the order to "surface" is given, there is more activ-

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ity—more excitement, it seems—than in submerging. And in both, the crew functions with perfect teamwork.

You learn that a submarine can dive from the surface and reach a depth of eighty feet in considerably less than a minute; that by blowing all ballast in an emergency, she can get to the surface just as quickly.

You have seen how she stalks prey in the darkness below, and accurately. You learn that while morale is high, the Navy spares no effort to keep it that way; for instance, because submarines on patrol may spend all daylight hours submerged—thus depriving their crews of sunlight for long periods—there have been experiments with sun lamps aboard the pigboats. And if you should be inclined to think a Navy using sun lamps has gone soft, just try to make something of it with the next pigboat man you meet.

Submarines are usually employed far in advance of the other forces of a fleet, screening it, and lying in wait for the advance units of the enemy. If U-boats ever attempt to come to these shores, there may be underwater duels with our own submarines. And having seen the efficiency with which the pigboats of our fleet operate, you are not doubtful about the outcome.

But it takes the flight in the Navy blimp to show you one of the simplest and most effective ways of tracking down and destroying the undersea prowler—a method not practicable in Europe today, but peculiarly suited to our own defense scheme.

Eyes of the Blimp

YOU board the "rubber cow," as the Navy calls these non-rigid airships, as she swings at her mooring mast in the sand dunes. The car attached to her silver belly is small; there are only the pilot, a radioman, an engineman, and another observer aboard.

The ship takes off with dexterous ease after her ground crew walks her away from the mast; she climbs steeply under the thrust of twin motors, and out over a strip of beach where surf runs like a lacy fringe, the pilot opens his sealed orders.

They instruct him to keep a rendezvous at ten o'clock, over the same tender which was target ship yesterday and is performing that duty today.

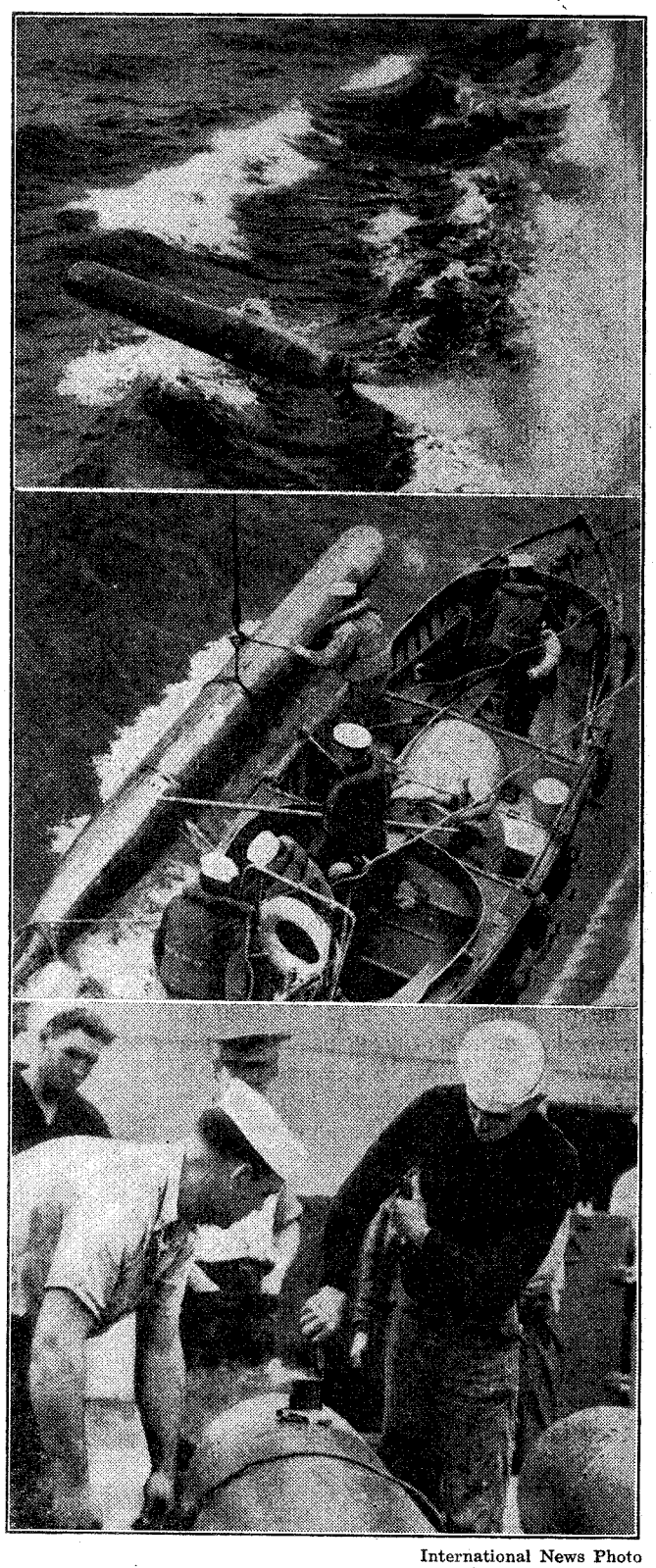
The coast drops astern. This is a lazy method of travel, from all the feeling you get in the control car; you see with surprise that the ship is doing better than fifty knots. The altimeter reads three hundred feet, and there is a sameness on the surface of the sea broken only when you sight the destroyers out yonder, and then the bulky tender.

The pilot guns his engines. You feel the ship slant steeply as she climbs. Four hundred—five hundred. And then the nose swings into the wind, and the "rubber cow" hangs there, suspended, motionless.

Remember that, because it is an important item in the employment of blimps against enemy submarines. Remember that no airplane can do this—that, aside from a bird, only a blimp can hover.

The game you saw played below the surface yesterday is on again. This time you have an unexcelled view, a box seat. And you are watching another phase of the contest in which teamwork is so highly developed.

The pilot of the blimp starts shuttling. Weaving back and forth over the target ship and in advance of her heading. All three members of the crew watch the surface keenly, and train glasses on distant horizons. If there were a submarine at forty or fifty feet, her whaleback would present a darker green shadow in the emerald and blue of the sea. If she hoisted her periscope for a quick reconnoiter, the feather of foam would be visible from the blimp as from nowhere else.



International News Photo

Torpedo practice. At the top the torpedo drops into the water after being fired; in the center it is being recovered; at the bottom the gun crew removes the torch case, a flare by which the torpedo is located

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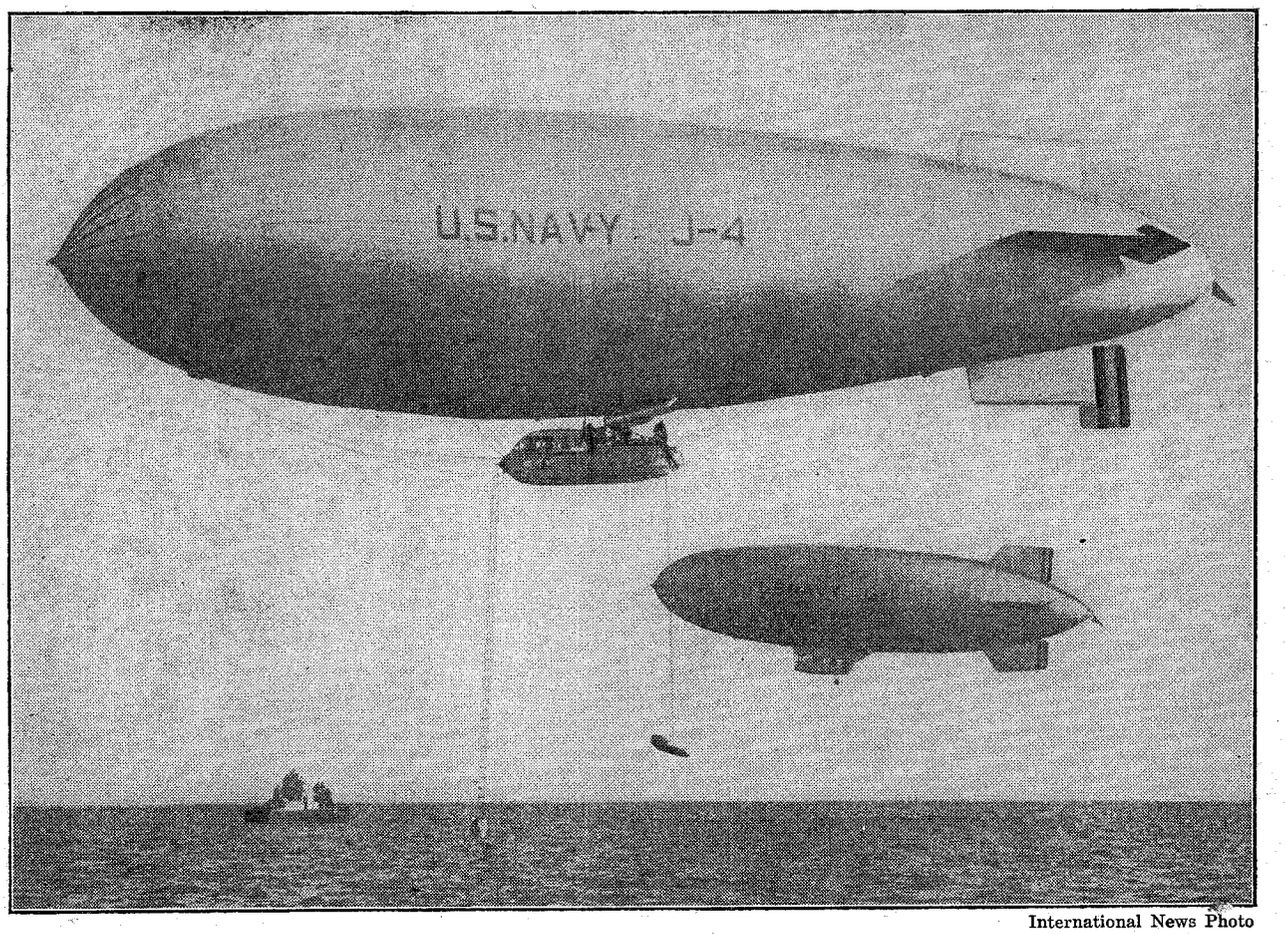

International News Photo

The "rubber cow" practices first aid. Here the J-4 is moored over a rubber lifeboat, which is being drawn up to the blimp

"Torpedoes off the port bow!"

The pilot has already seen the twin streaks—smooth furrows drawn across the surface by the missiles streaking beneath. He opens his throttles to the full, and puts the ship around. You watch the sea come up as he dives and swings on the same course those "tin fish" are making; you look on in breathless fascination as a smoke bomb bursts in the sky and the torpedoes pass just astern of the target ship. There is a line dragged back there, and the submarine probably will be credited with a hit.

But just now, according to the game, you are on the side of the pigboats to the extent of helping recover the valuable torpedoes.

The destroyers have sighted that smoke bomb, and they are helping, too. They come up at a speed that puts a bone in the teeth of each, but they are still thousands of yards away. The torpedo wakes turn white as the fish make surface and plough along a little way before coming to a stop.

When their yellow noses have turned to the sky, the blimp pilot swings low over each of them and heaves a smoke bomb from his window. The destroyers have boats in the water even before they have lost way; a few minutes later the fish are being hoisted aboard the submarine —and another run will be started when the destroyers have once more taken position.

YOU begin to understand the value of blimps, particularly since those of our Navy are filled with helium. One incendiary bullet can destroy a hydrogen gas bag, but helium is non-inflammable. And Uncle Sam has practically all of the world's supply.

It is not likely that Axis planes will appear over our harbor towns; there will be a fleet in the Atlantic to be reckoned with, first. Neither need we fear that surface warships will suddenly show up, to bag the rubber cows with sky guns.

No, but any submarine has a good chance of eluding surface patrols and coming in close to wreak havoc on our shipping. And there is where the blimps come in.

There are other things to watch for, in addition to periscope wakes and submarine shapes under the waves. Few submarines can avoid bilging a little Diesel oil now and then. The oil rises and creates a slick. Surface vessels don't always see it, and a plane streaking overhead at two hundred miles an hour can't observe it very closely.

But the lowly rubber cow can squat in the sky until that slick moves, or spreads, or the current moves it on and a new one rises. By this time—it could be hours—the blimp pilot is certain that his quarry is lying down there, waiting for darkness to come so he can get in his dirty work.

The blimp can drop depth charges with the same accuracy with which its pilot heaves a smoke bomb. Or it can radio for a destroyer or patrol boat to come up for the kill, while it hangs directly over the spot as a marker.

Our Navy has a number of these non-rigid airships, all working in close co-operation with surface craft, pigboats and everything else that goes to make up a fleet. We are building more.

YOU have gone from under the sea into the sky, and now you are about to go back below the sea again, but in a different manner. You are going to see how the

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Navy rescues men from stricken submarines, just as it did when the *Squalus* went down.

No other Navy in the world has developed so highly the procedure of submarine rescue work—this despite the fact that neither our submarine lung, once known as the Momsen lung, nor our nine-ton steel rescue chambers, are secret. The British have the Davis lung, but until recently at any rate, it was not nearly so efficient as ours.

This huge bell, shaped like a sawed-off top and capable of bringing nine men from the bottom in each load, rests on the deck of the salvage vessel. There is a yellow buoy floating in the sea, yonder; a small boat puts out and hoists it aboard. It bears a brass plate with the ominous inscription: *Submarine sunk here. Telephone inside.*

The salvage ship executes an expert bit of seamanship which few persons realize still exists in the modern Navy. Her skipper lays a four-point mooring: Four anchors, buoy-marked, are dropped at the corners of a rectangle. The sunken submarine is virtually in the center of this. When the mooring is laid, with six-inch manila lines run from the ship to each buoy—a difficult task for the small motor whaleboats in the rough sea—the salvage vessel can be moored as steadily as if she were at a pier.

This sounds complicated, but teamwork counts again. The whole job is done in some forty minutes. Now a diver is going over the side, going down the descending line secured to the submarine's deck.

"Topside!" he says suddenly.

"On the bottom!" the talker answers.

"I'm on the deck of the submarine."

It doesn't take long now. The cable to be used for the downhaul of the big rescue bell is passed down to him on the descending line. You watch the bubbles break surface while he works to shackle it to the escape hatch cover of the sub.

"Hoist away on the descending line!"

On the salvage ship they attach a tackle to the rescue chamber. A steam winch puffs, and the boom swings nine tons of steel outboard and lowers it till it touches the water. You get ready to go aboard that steel lung.

THE two operators have been testing the compressed-air engine and seeing that the cable is wound true on the reel. They had a little trouble on that last trip up from the *Squalus,* when the downhaul cable got fouled.

The diver is hauled aboard the tender. It's time to go. You climb over the bulwarks and up the steel-runged ladder. The bell is painted white inside, and lighted; you can look down through the lower hatch into the sea. You sit on a five-gallon can of water—there is a whole circle of them. Ballast, the operator explains, in addition to the ballast in the regular compartment of the bell.

The upper hatch has already been closed. Now the lower one is shut, and you sit looking through tiny glass eyeports in the steel bottom of the bell. The sea is a luminous green.

"Blow main ballast!"

One of the two operators opens a valve. Air hisses, and water rumbles out. The chamber is always operated with a positive buoyancy; its air motor pulls it down on the downhaul cable against this buoyancy. If the cable broke, it would rise to the surface.

"Flood the lower compartment!"

That chief gunner, topside on the deck of the rescue ship, has operated this chamber many a time. He is taking no chance of anyone on the job getting rattled; he knows every move to be made, and is calling them out. . . .

You hear the air motor. It sounds not unlike a toy machine gun, or a compressed-air riveter heard at a distance. The cable is running over that spool in the flooded lower compartment. The bell rocks and sways as it goes under the surface; it has a motion like a top that is almost spent. The sea is still rather rough.

You sit with your back against the chill steel bulkhead, and wonder how it would feel to be down in a submarine that was really helpless . . . waiting to hear a diver's heavy shoes on deck . . . waiting for this chamber to clamp itself on the topside. . . .

THE operator reports. "Twenty-five feet." A couple of minutes pass. The swaying decreases. "Fifty feet!" More time goes by, and the light dims in the eyeports. "Seventy-five feet!" the steel at your back grows colder.

There is a cushioned shock, and all motion stops. The operator peers through the eyeport in the bottom. You sense that something is wrong.

"Cable must be snarled," says the man at the engine. "Topside! I'm going to slack off a little!"

He puts the engine into gear again, and lets the bell rise a couple of feet.

"What's wrong?" topside inquires anxiously.

"Not a thing," responds the operator. "We just got here quicker than I expected. We're on the submarine!"

He lowers the chamber again. Now the process is reversed—main ballast is flooded. The lower compartment is blown, and vented. A fog appears on the eyeports in the bottom, and that's a sure sign a vacuum seal has been made over the hatch with the thick rubber gasket at the bottom end of the chamber.

The chamber's lower hatch is opened, and you can see the submarine hatch, with the downhaul cable shackled to its center. Four stout holding-down rods are bolted—just in case the submarine should roll so much as to loosen the chamber's vacuum seal—and the fair-lead of the cable is unrigged to permit opening of the submarine hatch.

It comes open. You see a few gallons of water spill into the pigboat. You see faces looking up at you.

A couple of officers come up to inspect the bell. Two submarine sailors who have never ridden in it, and who may have to ride in it some day, board the bell as passengers.

It is only a few minutes until the escape hatch has been closed, the fair-lead rigged, the holding-down rods removed. The lower hatch of the chamber is closed, the lower compartment flooded.

This breaks the seal. Main ballast is blown again, and the ascent started. The light grows stronger.

You reach the surface some fifty-five minutes after the hatch was shut over your head. Sea and sky look very blue, and topside is a nice place to be.

But you know that chances are, nine times out of ten, this rescue outfit could save the survivors from any submarine lying at four hundred feet or less.

You look back over a busy week. It seems to you that the Navy is ready. It's ready to fight anything that could come over, and ready to take care of its own in the event of any disaster.

You're proud to be an American, proud to be a stockholder in such a Fleet.

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Only in the fitful lightning flashes could that nightmare fisherman be seen

By Theodore Roscoe

Author of "I was the Kid with the Drum," "Frivolous Sal," etc.

Ghost on Lonesome Hill

Every town has its haunted house; but naturally the one in Four Corners was something super, infested as it was by a spectre who roved its fearsome interior in search of bottled ships and a flying fortune. It also had something new in the way of a ghost-breaker: a newspaper johnny who fished for peril at the bottom of a hidden well

I

EVERY community has its haunted house. The one on Lonesome Hill is typical. Shutters askew. Bald spots where the shingles have weathered. Doors sagging open to wind and rain. Veranda tumbled down to the weeds.

"Folks from Four Corners won't go near it," Cap'n Caleb of the Canada local pointed out. "Nor the summer people, either, 'count of the place's got such a bad reppitation. Furniture's still in the house. Carpets 'in' everything. 'Cept for where the cupola's was blowed off in last summer's storm, Old Mansion's just as it was when Sheep Colebaugh killed his brother, Winth'up, there, seventeen years ago."

"Murder, eh?" The elderly stranger raised amused gray brows.

"Jury couldn't decide." "The old conductor shook his head. "Sheep—real name was Shepherd, but he kind of looked like a sheep—he was bad beat up. Claimed Winth'up was whalin' him with a stove poker, an' he struck in self-defense, usin' a hatchet.

"There's a bash on Sheep's scalp, big as New York, and his reddish hair stuck to the poker in Winth'up's fist. But the prosecutor claimed Winth'up might've hit *Sheep* in self-defense, 'stead o' the other way around. Tried to prove a robbery motive, seein' as Sheep was heavy in debt. Case fell down, though—the only one Aminidab Coward ever lost. Police couldn't never find the money."

"Fight over a legacy, was it?"

"No, but Winth'up had been to County Bank that afternoon and drawed out thirty thousand dollars. Queer skinflint—wouldn't never accept nor write out checks. All the Colebaughs was tighter'n purse-strings, and Sheep

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an' Winth'up was the last of the line. Only Sheep wasn't smart about investments like Winth'up.

"Sheep was lazy—spent his time carvin' wooden models and sailin' ships and stickin' 'em in glass bottles. Winth'up was makin' a good investment there at the last, he was goin' to buy Ez Sailor's prize herd of Jerseys and aimin' to pay cash."

Cap'n Caleb shook his head and shifted his cud.

THE train was backing slowly around a curve and the valley panorama narrowed. The engineman sent a long whistle echoing across the slopes. The cry seemed to linger, faint and far away, around the old house miniatured in the afternoon distance on the ridge across the river.

"He was goin' to pay cash," the conductor resumed, spitting expertly over the hand-rail. "But when Ez Sailor arrived after supper, he was just in time to hear the fightin' and the yells. Them brothers lived alone in the big old house, and Sailor knew somethin' mighty bad was afoot. He run into the house, and there's Winth'up on the floor with his head hangin' by a thread; an' Sheep lyin' beside him with a dent in his skull and blood a-runnin' down his face, lookin' dead, too."

"And the money?" the stranger inquired, politely interested.

"Disappeared, seems as if Ez Sailor never see it. Sheriff Whittier couldn't find it. Went over that house with a currycomb, but there ain't no thirty thousand dollars anywhere.

"Sheep claims he never set eyes on it and didn't even know Winth'up had drawed it out. Said the fight had started over an arg'ment about Calvin Coolidge. Anyhow, the prosecutor couldn't prove a motive, and that money just appears to 've vanished. Folks used to think it was hid up in that old house, but nobody ever found it."

"What became of this fellow—this Sheep?"

"Gave him manslaughter. Got out on good behavior in four or five years; come back and closed the house; sold some timber land he had over in Canada; went to live in England. Funny, ain't it? Folks in these parts don't hear a word of him until they pick up a mornin' paper just this last March. He was killed when a bomb hit a big air-raid shelter in London."

The stranger removed his glasses and gazed off across the valley, smiling reflectively. "Payment deferred, eh? And the house?"

"Up for sale. No one'd buy it, though. Too many back taxes. Yeah, and too lonesome."

"I prefer a good hotel, myself," the other man chuckled. "Incidentally, which one would you recommend? I'd like to be near some bass fishing, and I'm only staying overnight."

Cap'n Caleb recommended the Springhouse. "And if you're goin' back to the city, there's only one mornin' train. Pulls out at seven-ten, sharp. Good luck on the bass."

"Thank you, conductor. I know I'm going to enjoy the fishing."

JOHNNY HARTER couldn't help listening. It was the first time he'd heard a detailed account of the Colebaugh murder, although Mrs. Briscomb at the Springhouse had sketched some of the story. Mrs. Briscomb, a spiritualist, subscribed to the ghostly version—that Brother Winthrop's soul tenanted the ruined mansion; that, on nights of no moon, moans and groans emanated from the old, dark walls; that, the week following his departure to England, Sheep Colebaugh's face had appeared in an upper window, sheepish and blood-streaked, his countenance as guilty as Cain's.

"Ask anyone in the valley," Mrs. Briscomb would nod. "Ask Mule Lickette or Ez and Mordecai Sailor. Ask Aunt Tabitha Aldritch, or Tom Timothy who owns Tom's Lunch Car down at the station. Ask them why they don't dast go near that house on Lonesome Hill."

Johnny Harter had grinned. A newspaperman on vacation is apt to confine his spirits to Scotch.

Only once in the seven years he'd been coming to Four Corners had he sauntered up Lonesome Hill to have a look at the abode of shades. It was depressing enough. The old mansion with its cupola, gables, and ornate gingerbread was a crumbling monument to a day of graft and lavish bad taste.

Johnny could picture the Colebaugh brothers living there in ingrown solitude—Winthrop with his bankbooks, and Sheep with his sailing ships in glass bottles—both infected by a healthless atmosphere of decline. The flush of the 1920's had breathed false life into the dying estate, but money was not the cure for the monkish brothers. On blighted stems they had rotted and fallen—fratricide in such mustiness was inevitable.

Johnny Harter had been amused at the ghost story; but as an ace police-reporter, hardened to streamlined metropolitan homicides, he had little faith in spooks.

Old Caleb's account of the murder, brief and free from local superstition, presented an angle that Johnny, overhearing it, hadn't thought of before.

As the train panted into the familiar green-roofed station, Johnny was thinking that thirty grand was a lot of money to lose track of in a back-country village; there might be a story in it, and he made a mental note to ask Sheriff Dan Whittier about it.

Then he remembered he was on vacation, after trout and not a seventeen-year-old crime. The train stopped with a jolt; Johnny knocked the dottle out of his pipe, picked up his fishing-kit and bag, and stepped out of the cindery vestibule.

Jed Hapgood was there in the miraculous and ancient Franklin station-wagon, shouting, "Springhouse! Customers for the Springhouse!" but the season was early, and the stranger and Johnny Harter were his only passengers.

As they chugged and backfired through the village, Johnny appraised his fellow traveler's fishing gear with a wary eye. The man himself was portly, red-cheeked; he was evidently an enthusiast even if an amateur. His rods were new; the creel had just come from Abercrombie and Fitch; minnow pail and tackle box were so shiny and untried as to seem ostentatious. From the man's neat, gray Van Dyke and decorous manner, Johnny judged him to be a doctor or college professor.

He inquired conversationally, "This your first time in Four Corners?"

The stranger nodded. "I think I'm going to like it here. You're a regular, I take it."

"Best place in the state for trout," Johnny declared. "Isn't fished out like the more fashionable spots. Can't be beat for big-mouth bass."

"So I've heard," the other said. "I've never been in

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the East before; my wife thinks I'm crazy to leave New York City's bright lights and come up here to fish. But I'll take bass to Broadway any time. Not many good places to fish where I come from in the Middle West."

He sighed, gazing off at the river, and conversation lapsed.

Jed honked a herd of cows out of the way, and then they were jolting up a gravel road between tall, arched elms, and halting at the veranda of the Springhouse.

Johnny was relieved to see the rocking chair brigade was not yet on hand—he'd have a chance to relax on the veranda evenings without listening to acidulous gossip.

The wide, old-fashioned lobby with its complement of horsehair furniture was, save for Mrs. Briscomb, deserted. Mrs. Briscomb, who altered neither in dress nor deportment with the passing years, hurried forward with her customary sparse hospitality.

"How do, Mr. Harter? Happy to see you. Your old room is ready and supper's a-waitin'. Breakfast six-thirty's usual, if you want it."

Johnny expressed interest in the supper, but avoided the subject of breakfast. It was a meal he invariably declined, much to Mrs. Briscomb's disapproval.

"*I'll* have breakfast," the newcomer said. "I'm only stopping for the night." He was signing the ledger: *Stewart J. Ladd—Indianapolis*—and he asked Mrs. Briscomb if he might pay for his room with a traveler's check.

Jed came in to carry up the bags, and Johnny Harter followed upstairs, anxious to change into sweater and flannels and explore an aroma of coffee and Yankee pot roast issuing from the dining room.

Mrs. Briscomb's table was notable for its home-cooking, and Johnny dived in. Honeydew melon. Bean soup. Brook trout. Steaming roast and brown gravy. In harmony with crisp salad in a wooden bowl, nine kinds of preserves, coffee served by the pot and actual, unadulterated cream.

The city room wouldn't ring up in the middle of the salad and rush him up Park Avenue to look at some society jade with a bullet in her left eye. Dusk was blue at the windows; the valley vista, in twilight, was as peaceful as a cow-bell. Johnny grinned to himself, "God bless America!" and thought of translucent trout pools and three weeks of leisurely sport. Tonight the boys in the city room would be sweating over the news tickers. He'd go upstairs and tie some flies. Big news here was a murder that happened seventeen years ago, back in 1924.

II

THE thought disconnected in Johnny's mind; without realizing the shift, his attention had diverted to Mr. Ladd, sitting by himself at a corner table. A bottle of Mrs. Briscomb's choicest elderberry at his cuff, Mr. Ladd was just then assailing a porterhouse steak.

"That's funny." Johnny Harter straightened up in his chair, puzzled. Queer part of it was, he couldn't find out just what was funny about it. Something odd about Mr. Ladd—something Johnny couldn't put his mental finger on. He averted his stare to avoid Mr. Ladd's head-turn.

"Wonderful steak," Mr. Ladd spoke across the otherwise deserted dining room. "Don't have juicy ones like this in the city, do we?"

"Mrs. Briscomb's table is an experience," Johnny agreed.

Mr. Ladd ate with relish. He buttered home-made rolls the way a brick-layer trowels cement. Three green salads and two steaks disappeared before him. Lingering over coffee and cigarettes, Johnny Harter watched. Queer. He couldn't identify it, but something about Mr. Ladd at table was damned peculiar.

He waited until Mr. Ladd had departed; then he sauntered out to the lobby, his forehead furrowed, baffled. Idly he paused at a library table to examine some last-season periodicals; he was scanning an old copy of the Four Corners *Bee* when Mr. Ladd, caparisoned now with hip boots, reel, rods and camper's lantern, came hurrying down from his room. To Mrs. Briscomb, bustling in from the kitchen, Mr. Ladd explained he expected to be out late and inquired the best place to go plug-casting.

"Peterson's mill pond below the river bridge? Just beyond the Sailor farms? I won't be trespassing? Thank you, Mrs. Briscomb."

Johnny Harter only half-heard. He was reading in the *Bee*, under a March 12, '41 date-line:

Four Corners Man Meets Death Abroad. Shepherd Colebaugh One of Many Killed in Public Shelter During London Air Raid. Few Survivors in Bombing Disaster.

It has been reported by the London Police that the body of Shepherd H. Colebaugh, long resident of a Russell Square hotel, was discovered among the 147 victims buried in the ruins of a large Soho Underground struck by—

"Now that Mr. Ladd's a real gentleman," Mrs. Briscomb commented. "Polite and mannerly. Didn't slam the screen. Wisht there were more people like him come to the Springhouse."

"Now, Mrs. Briscomb," Johnny tossed aside the paper, teasing, "it's his beard that gets you."

"I like his *manners*," the lady insisted tartly. "Paid up soon as he came in, and didn't start right in fussing for extra service. Some of our folks in the East could learn some manners from these Midwesterners."

Johnny Harter stiffened. Midwestern! That was it! He murmured, "Now, I wonder—" He arranged a grin. "Just wondering if I was too late for the movie—I see there's a show at the Firehouse. Incidentally, I notice in this old *Bee* that Shepherd Colebaugh was killed. When did he go to England?"

Mrs. Briscomb snapped, "Four years after he slew his brother with a hatchet."

"Never came back after he closed the house, I suppose."

Mrs. Briscomb stared into the lamplight. "They always come back," she said in a hollowed tone. "Winth'up's still there. Quiet nights his soul is in that house—he's been heard to play his old piano. And Sheep's been there to kill him again. They've seen Sheep's face at the window only last week. Murderers always come back, Mr. Harter, and there was murder in that old house on Lonesome Hill."

"I'll take the movies," Johnny preferred huskily. "Don't bother to call me for breakfast."

BUT instead of following the road to the village, he turned off at Davenport's Lumber Yard and took the footpath leading to the riverbank. The night had darkened to a distillation of indigo; the valley breeze had died; the leafy underbrush was still. A moon was nesting in gray-green clouds on Blackberry Ridge; there was a feeling of rain.

Johnny quickened his pace.

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Everything in that old kitchen flew; pots and pans cascaded to the floor

Peterson's Mill was on the other side of the river, and when he discovered Mr. Ladd's light on the opposite bank, Johnny slowed to a stroll, then halted in a thicket of willows to watch.

The stream widens there to several hundred yards; and that night, in the stillness, the water scarcely made a murmur, sliding like black, liquid glass over Peterson's Dam. Mr. Ladd was standing near the silhouetted mill wheel.

"At least he's no tyro," Johnny thought as the fisherman assumed a stance. The rod made a faint shimmer in the darkness and across the water came the reel's fine, unspinning, thread-thin whine. Far upstream the bass-plug lit near lily-pads with a tiny splash; Mr. Ladd began to reel in. Under his breath Johnny Harter exclaimed, "That was a darn good cast!"

Subsequent casts were even better; after ten minutes, Johnny Harter knew he was watching an angler of championship caliber. Unfortunately the fish weren't rising; the night was unseasonably warm and quiet; the moon was presently obscured and a flutter of light behind Blackerry Ridge presaged a possible thunderstorm.

Intent on Mr. Ladd's superlative performance with rod and reel, Johnny ignored the brooding sky.

"He's got a stout arm," Johnny thought. "No wonder he tucks away such heavy meals." Then, reminded, he scoffed at himself, "I'm getting worse than Mrs. Briscomb. Seeing things. Everybody doesn't read Emily Post's book of etiquette, and that old boy can handle a fishpole if not a fork."

A rataplan of thunder drummed across the valley; a splash of rain struck his hand, and Johnny saw 10:40 on his wrist dial.

"Ought to mind my own business," he chided himself. "On vacation ought to keep my nose at home. A reporter gets so damned—"

He broke off with a grunt, staring. That was creepy. Where *was* Mr. Ladd? Five seconds ago he'd been on the bank over there, reeling in. Now he was gone. Disappeared. Moon under clouds and riverbank black as a hat.

Johnny thought, "His lantern must've gone out."

Then green light fled across the sky—stream, mill, dam came into view with acetylene-flare clarity—there was no sign of the fisherman. Had Ladd fallen into the water? Johnny checked an impulse to call out. Thunder slam-banged; a gust of damp wind swayed the blacked-out willows; obviously Ladd had ducked for shelter into the old mill.

Hugged against a tree, Johnny contemplated a dash for the village. He was tightening his belt for the sprint when lightning criss-crossed overhead, and to his surprise he saw, or thought he saw, the fisherman breasting through the riverbank undergrowth farther upstream.

ANOTHER sky-flare—Mr. Ladd was a shadow dodging from bush to bush, running. Johnny's surprise that the angler should be racing along the river bend without a light to see by was doubled by the realization that the runner was heading away from the village, following the river's ox-bow into a steep-walled glen.

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For an elderly man, he was moving with surprising agility. The bank was rocky over there, the glen mouth wild and forbidding. Four successive explosions of lightning showed the rubber-booted figure disappearing into the shadowy ravine.

Black rain plunged abruptly down and the figure vanished. Curiosity impelled Johnny to take the trail. Keeping to his side of the stream, he tagged along through the blowing rain and entered the glen. He had to move swiftly to keep up, for the man on the other side, revealed by sporadic flashes, was a hundred yards ahead and traveling at rapid pace.

Although Johnny had the advantage of a path, he was forced to exert himself in pursuit; while, climbing over the rocks and soapstone under the loose, shale wall, Ladd was scouting along with the uncanny sure-footedness of an Indian.

Then Johnny halted, inhaling a mouthful of rain. In a blaze of electricity the man across the glen was gone.

A steep gully opened into the ravine there, and, at the next flash, Johnny saw Ladd halfway up the precipitous ascent, burrowing through dense ferns. Johnny was forced to race some distance up stream to a ford; he waded the swollen torrent with difficulty, and when at last he reached and started up the fern-banked gully, Ladd was nowhere in sight.

A growing conviction that the man knew his trail became certainty at the gully-top. Out of breath, wet to the skin, Johnny gained the crest above the glen; a lightning flare revealed open landscape, a slope of uncut ragweed. At the top of the field, in jungly silhouette, the inky trees of a rain-swept orchard.

Pictured briefly against the thunderheads, the humpbacked roofline of Old Mansion loomed up out of the trees as some sort of architectural dinosaur that had crawled up there to die.

"My God!" Johnny gasped. "Lonesome Hill!"

III

IT WAS lonesome, all right. Peering through the rain, Johnny could see no sign of the fisherman. After a series of blinding electrical displays, he could see no sign of anything. He floundered upslope through the black storm, wondering if he shouldn't have his brains examined by a psychiatrist.

Ladd wasn't trespassing. Ladd had more sense. Ladd was a Midwesterner with somewhat unconventional table manners, who preferred bass-fishing to a Broadway sightseeing bus. His lantern had gone out; in the rainstorm he'd lost his bearings; he'd stumbled into the glen and ventured up Lonesome Hill by mischance, and now, undoubtedly, he was hurrying along the ridge back to the village.

Johnny, blundering into the jungle of dead apple trees, thought, "I'm a fool!"

He found a dim footpath approaching the house; lightning blazed in the rain, and he could discern no bootprint; he was on the point of turning back when a rustle in the orchard underbrush at his left held him rooted.

The sky flickered, and Johnny stood appalled. There it was. Visible in that moment of brilliant glare. Staring at him from ambush. The gray face of a sheep!

Rain guttered in cold tickles down Johnny's neck; thunder fell down a stairway in the sky; something rushed by him in a blur; then a flash above the orchard lit the downpour, and Johnny saw gray hindquarters leaping off through the trees. His stomach loosened with a laugh.

So that was the ghost of Lonesome Hill. One of Mordecai Sailor's ewes!

He mopped rain from his face, grinning, wondering what Mrs. Briscomb would say if advised that the ectoplasm of Shepherd Colebaugh's murderous soul was composed of mutton chops.

Backing under a gnarled tree, Johnny turned up his sweater-collar, twisted water from his wrists and knelt to roll up his trouser-cuffs against a muddy sprint for home. Something hard, sharp-pointed dug into his knee. The thing clung to his knee-cap as he straightened up; cloth tore as he wrenched it free, and swore as barbs hooked into his hand.

He held it up to a lightning-flicker. A bass-plug! New and shiny. A nickel-nosed wooden spinner with steel hooks in its feathered tail.

"He must've dropped it here!" Johnny exclaimed aloud. "He—he *did* come into this orchard!"

Why would a sportsman abandon bass-fishing, extinguish his lantern and tangent off through a rainstorm to visit a haunted house? Yes, and sneak up through a glen instead of taking the wagon-road along the ridge?

Questions flitted in Johnny's mind as he loped on in the rain, scouting the ruined mansion. He was not surprised to spy rubberboot tracks on the muddy path, now —Mr. Ladd must have jogged into the orchard by a shortcut—the trail was plainly visible at each sky-flare.

The tracks trotted through a garden of wild lilacs, entered the mansion by a side door. On gumsoled shoes Johnny followed, pausing at the muddied doorstep to notch up his belt and pull in an encouraging breath.

Carefully he groped into the entry; stood tense, listening. Inner darkness was like a blindfold, thick with smells of damp-rot, rupture and decay. He had an impression of rain-drip and stale plaster of rotted woodwork and mould.

Lightning blazed to illumine a broad hallway, with open doors on either side, and bootprints trailing down to a doorway at the back.

Johnny waited, sweating, in a silence too fusty to breathe. The walls dripped and gurgled as though every pipe in the house had sprung a leak; thunder echoed like gunfire in a catacomb; he waited for blackout before following the boot tracks.

INCHING his way forward, he passed a series of ghostly chambers—rooms littered with warped furniture, stagnant carpets, tarnished tapestries. Lightning flickered through broken shutters, and Johnny shied at a glimpse of a black, grand piano standing like a three-legged coffin in a tomb.

A grandfather clock with a bird's nest bearding its face waited farther on. Everywhere was evidence of Shepherd Colebaugh's handiwork: glass jugs, bottles and demijohns containing miniature figurines and model sailing ships. He could picture the man whittling in hours of useless industry, and he wondered, too, in which of these moldering rooms he had whittled that final piece of handiwork with a hatchet.

The house was a rendezvous of spectres. Shades came and fled at each lightning-flutter; he could hear them creeping out of the woodwork, prowling unknown rooms

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overhead. But spirits don't leave bootprints and Johnny knew the ones leading him down that corridor had been left by a fisherman, an elderly Midwesterner who had come to Four Corners after bass.

That they were tracking through the old mansion after bass Johnny could not believe; but then, arriving at the doorway at hall's end, peering into the gloomy chamber beyond, Johnny gaped.

Ladd *was* fishing!

Electricity blazed across a broken-shuttered window; the room jumped into view; Johnny was rooted on the threshold of a high-ceiled, old fashioned kitchen. Sink, pump, rusted carcass of an iron stove, walls festooned with cobwebby pots and pans—if he lived to a thousand, Johnny would never forget that scene. That junk-strewn kitchen interior, and that booted, flittergibbet figure posed at room's center, rod and reel in hand!

Fishing! Reeling in! The slim steel rod jiggling, bent almost double to the weight of some catch it was angling out of a square, black aperture in mid-floor!

Boots braced apart, the man stood with his back toward Johnny, winding the spool on the rod-handle, breathing gustily.

Thunder shook the house. Blackout. Johnny Harter stood in cold atrophy. The reel made a straining whine; then the fisherman spoke out clearly, "I've got it!"

To Johnny the scene pictured by the next electrical flicker had the hallucinary aspect, half reality, half idiocy, of a dream. The fisherman on bended knee, pulling in his wet line. Something bright, glisteny, coming up out of that trap in the kitchen floor. A jubilant oath from the angler as he held up the dripping prize.

Ladd had caught a glass jug. A big, green, two-gallon, glass jug!

Jerking loose a big tarpon-hook from the jug handle, the fisherman held the demijohn between his knees and bent straining, twisting to draw the wooden bung from the jug-neck. The plug was swollen as though from long immersion. Uttering a snarl of impatience, the man crossed the kitchen and smashed the jug against a corner of the stove. In lightning flare, Johnny saw the explosion of glass, saw the jug's contents scatter in a green shower at the fisherman's boots.

No one had to tell Johnny what that green shower was. But Ladd was telling him. Dropping to his knees, Ladd was clawing at the currency, feverishly stuffing the bills into his fisherman's creel, in the darkness babbling to himself like a sleep-talker in delirium.

"Money—money! I've got it! At last." Excited, unnatural, his voice keyed up in fluty triumph. "Thirty thousand! It's mine! It always was mine—!"

Johnny Harter, listening, felt sick. He was reminded of Ladd's gourmand appetite. The creel on the man's belt was like a marsupial pouch, and in the play of blackout and light-flicker it was as though the man were stuffing himself with cash, gorging himself on hundred-dollar bills.

Johnny wheeled to go; then froze.

Do—re—mi—fa—sol—!

Distinctly, tinny and out of tune, the piano in that room down the hall ran the scale. Frost formed on Johnny Harter's neck-nape.

"Who's that? Who's out there, I say!"

It was Ladd's voice, shrill, piping in terror.

Johnny hugged the door-jamb, marrow-numbed.

Mr. Ladd shrilled from the darkness of the kitchen, "Is that you? *Is that you, Winthrop—?"*

IV

THUNDER tumbled around the house and faded off down the valley, and the man in the kitchen squalled, "I know you're out there, Winthrop—out there at your piano! You've come back, damn you! Back from the dead! But I'm not afraid of you!"

The squalling rose to a screech. "The old man left it all to you, but it belonged as much to me, and I'm taking it, Winthrop, after seventeen years—yaah!—out of the place where you saw me hiding it that night. You said I'd stolen it from your desk, but it belonged to me—"

The man was in the doorway, aiming a flashlight down the hall, focusing the white circle squarely on a posed, black cat. Like a thought, the animal sped away; the man shouted, swerved, grazed Johnny Harter's elbow, stabbed the flashlight into Johnny's face.

He bellowed, "So it's *you!"*

Johnny faced the contorted countenance squarely. "Yes Mr. Ladd!"

"You followed me here!"

"It would seem so, wouldn't it?"

"Why?"

Johnny said flatly, "I didn't think you were anybody from the Middle West named Ladd."

"And now," the mouth grinning over the Van Dyke snarled, "you know who I am."

Johnny's voice, husky, sawed his throat. "I wouldn't be surprised if you were one of the rottenest swine who ever lived. Likely you'd have murdered your brother for thirty dollars, much less thirty grand. If your hair hadn't grayed and you'd shave off that beard, you'd turn out to be—"

Whack!

The sudden violence of the blow caught Johnny off guard. Slashing across his ear, the fisherman's lantern rang like a gong, toppling him sideways into the kitchen. Johnny sprawled, and the man was on him, bestial in the darkness, pounding, slavering.

Locked together, they scrimmaged across the floor in a battle that shook the timbers under them and brought pots and pans banging down. Darkness. Scuffle. Thud of fists. Savage oaths.

Johnny punched, kicked, jabbed with his elbows, fighting to dislodge his attacker. The man's weight was suffocating; he was possessed of a crushing strength that overwhelmed Johnny with its ferocity.

"Spy on me, will you? Enter *my* house, will you? I'll teach you to trespass! I'll kill you—!"

Roweling Johnny with his knees, he battered savagely with the flashlamp. Desperately Johnny drove his fists into the goatish face. A sickly smell of blood, whisky, perspiration stifled him. Driving his knee into the heavier man's midriff, he broke away, rolled across the floor, collided with a chair and pulled himself to his feet.

In a lightning-glare the fisherman, an ogre in boots, rushed. Johnny swung the chair.

Uselessly the chair struck the butting head, breaking to pieces like cardboard. Thick arms caught Johnny in a stupefying hug; waltzed him across the floor and threw him crashing into the stove.

There was a jangle of iron as the stove collapsed and

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the fighters went down in a junk heap of lids, grate-bars and scrap. Johnny's forehead struck the fire-door and he rolled out from under in a painful daze.

Hallowe'en light streamed through the window, and in this fitful glare Ladd was a figure in a nightmare, swaying over Johnny, brandishing a grid-bar, spewing baleful oaths. Red-eyed, bloody-nosed, he lashed down at Johnny in mad fury, screaming, "I'm going to bash your brains out! I'm going to finish you!"

Leaping to dodge the brutal blow, Johnny slipped on broken glass; his feet shot out; the kitchen blacked out as he floundered; then the flooring seemed to open under him and he was falling, unable to save himself, as one falls in a black dream.

"They'll never catch me!" he screeched. "No; and they'll never find you"

THERE was the sudden, icy shock of water; a deep, smothering plunge; automatically he struggled upward to the surface. His hand came in contact with a cold, wall, smooth as pottery; he was unable to claw a finger-hold; he realized he was swimming in some sort of subterranean tank, and, treading water, he tried to look up.

Far above him, echoing out of darkness, there was a burst of laughter.

"How do you like it down there, young man? How do you like it down there in the cistern?"

Johnny cried up, "Get me out of here—!" gargling on a mouthful of water as his clothing dragged him down.

Another burst of crazy laughter. "Do you think I'm weak-minded? Let you spill the truth for me after all these years? Seventeen years of exile in London—poverty the last three—ruined by the British and their crazy war! You can stay down there until you rot, do you hear? Right down there where the money was waiting—good as in the bank! Down there under water—!"

Johnny's heart sank with him that time. He wailed, splashing in blind darkness, "They'll get you for this, Colebaugh! You leave me down here, and you'll go to the chair!"

"Not me!" was the answering shout. "I was clever enough not to touch the money so the police couldn't pin me with a motive—yah!—they won't soon find you, either! You're thirty feet underground, young fella—in water ten feet deep—climb up that conduit pipe if you can! And you can holler your lungs out after I slam down the trap. Nobody'll hear you yell. Nobody'll ever find you. Villagers and summer folk don't come up here on Lonesome Hill! Sure! The house is haunted!"

It was haunted then, for Johnny Harter, by a lambent glimmer of light, a glimpse of circular wall; high overhead, framed in the square aperture, that blood-streaked, jovial face.

"Take your time and drown!" came the shrill-pitched hail. "You were smart to tell Mrs. Briscomb not to expect you for breakfast!"

The trap slammed to extinguish the picture. Total darkness. Johnny Harter swam in blindness and a solitude lonelier than anything he had ever experienced in his life.

V

"YOU were out late last night, Mr. Ladd." He looked up from his breakfast bacon and smiled serenely at Mrs. Briscomb in the dining room door.

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"Yes, I was. Didn't get any fish, but enjoyed trying immensely. Did you hear me come in?"

"Don't know whether it was you or young Mr. Harter. But I'm used to fishermen coming in late—and Mr. Harter, land sakes! he's liable to stay out all hours."

"He seemed," the man touched his lips with his napkin, "like a very personable young man. I suppose he's up there snoring. Well, it's nice to be young. Saves one from such accidents as I suffered last night."

"You had an accident?" Mrs. Briscomb was anxious.

He chuckled, removing his glasses. "Nothing. Bruised my eye a little and thought I'd sprained my hand. Broke my fishing lantern, you see, and slipped on wet rocks. Suppose I overdid for a man my age, but"—he lifted his shoulders and sighed—"bass fishing is such wonderful sport. Had a splendid night of it in spite of the storm and having to take shelter in that old mill. I really must come back next year. A compliment to your cooking, Mrs. Briscomb. Breakfast is delicious."

She exclaimed, "Awful sorry to have you go, Mr. Ladd. The river *is* dangerous if you ain't familiar with—" She broke off with a gesture. "There's the train whistle. They stop here fifteen minutes but you better be started."

Everything was ready; everything packed. The slabs of green currency—twenties, fifties, hundred-dollar bills—secure in his Gladstone; in his trouser-pocket a couple of loose twenties. He grinned to himself all the way in Jed's bus to the village.

Where the road dipped downhill to the river, he had a glimpse of the distant ridge and the old house miniatured against morning sky. A curse for the house. For stingy old Winthrop. For that fool interloper. It had been touch and go, but he had the money at last, and he smiled to himself.

At the depot, the ticket seller had to hurry over to Tom's Lunch Car to make change. The pleasant, elderly gentleman stood idly lighting a plump cigar, watching the brakemen hitch on a milk car.

JOHNNY HARTER counted, "Three hundred and one—three hundred and two—" forcing his arms to propel his wearied body. Five slow strokes carried him around the circular tank. Sometimes he lost count when he floated on his back or treaded water. But it dispersed the panic that mounted in him when he forgot to move his arms and started to sink. Then he would swim frantically, thrashing, wasting his strength. "I've got to swim!" he would shout to himself. "I've got to!"

That was at first when desperate gropings and underwater plunges failed to discover an outlet, and hope was gone. He was going to drown, going to founder in this subterranean cistern like a rat in a sewer. His shouts were thrown back at him by unseen, close-pressing walls.

Now he had overcome hysteria; he was swimming slowly, conserving every movement, counting each slow stroke.

"Three hundred and three—three hundred and four—"

He was a strong swimmer, but last night's struggle had used him up; his head pained cruelly from that scalp-slash, his arms were numb from the water's cold. He breast-stroked to ease aching shoulder-muscles. At five hundred he would rest by floating on his back.

But when he floated he would drift and look up and start thinking. Thinking in the dark. Trying to gauge the distance to that trap door up there. Wondering how long he could keep swimming at the bottom of this well. He would remember that the house above was a desolate ruin abandoned to isolation on a hilltop, five lonely miles from the village.

"Villagers don't go near it, nor the summer folk, either—" he could hear Cap'n Caleb saying.

"Nobody'll hear you! Nobody'll ever find you!"

How many hours had he been swimming down here? Was it morning yet? Noon? Had Mrs. Briscomb discovered his absence? But they wouldn't know where to look!

Round and round he was swimming, a marathon of futile circles. He was tiring, weakening. His mouth filled with dank water and he blew it out with a gasp, dog-paddling wildly.

Black terror seized him again. Terror of the darkness, the staling air enclosed by greasy walls. Terror that he might be gripped by a cramp. He plunged, kicked and thrashed, churning the unseen water to a swirl. No way out. No escape. Sooner or later exhaustion would overcome him. Weeks later, maybe months, some chance visitor to the house might dredge up his bones.

He began to shout, filling the tombed dark with empty-echoed hallooing. He was sinking, going under. A numbing lassitude came over him. In his mind there occurred an insistent, deadly whisper. Why prolong this torture? Why swim down here in this death-trap hour after hour? Why wait—?

His toes touched bottom; his lungs were bursting; if he pulled a quick mouthful, a deep draught—

With a tremendous effort of will, Johnny Harter drove himself out of suffocation to the surface.

Voices! A delirium of yells! Shouts! Johnny knew he was fainting, suffering delusion. He fought the water desperately, trying to clear his brain. Drowning, he seemed to see a bright light. A glow flooding down from above. The water came into view—swirling ink—green walls of slime that went up and up. He raised his eyes, half-blinded by the electric glare. High overhead he saw an opening. A hand aiming a flashlight. Scared faces looking down.

"Johnny! Johnny!" came the shouts.

He waved a weak hand, calling out, sobbing. "Here I am! Here I am—!"

A man was coming down on a rope.

VI

"BUT why'd you follow him in the first place?" Sheriff Dan Whittier wondered. "Cap'n Caleb didn't recognize him on th' local. Jed Hapkood didn't recognize him. Mrs. Briscomb didn't know him, and I didn't neither. If he hadn't lost his head an' tried to run, the minute I mentioned the fact that we hadn't seen a bill of that size for a good many years, since about the time of the Colebaugh murder, I might've passed him on that twenty-dollar bill, let him go." The Sheriff wagged his chin. "We'd known him in the old days, too. You'd never seen Sheep Colebaugh. What made you suspect him?"

Johnny, grinning from the luxury of linen pillows—Mrs. Briscomb was even allowing him to smoke in bed—gestured his pipe. "I'd heard the story of the hatchet murder before, but coming up on the train this trip, Cap'n Caleb was telling our interested stranger some details new

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to me. About the missing money and how Sheep Colebaugh had gone to live in England."

"Sure," the Sheriff nodded. "So right off you suspected that this stranger was Sheep come back to get the cash! Especially after the papers reported his death in a London air raid."

He shook a flutter of cablegrams under Johnny's nose. "It takes Scotland Yard two days to confirm the evidence—that it wasn't Colebaugh who was killed, but some other American name of Ladd—that Colebaugh exchanged passports with the headless body, then escaped unnoticed out of the smoke, fire and uproar, and left London, impersonatin' Mr. Ladd. He cultivates a Van Dyke, same as the passport photo, and gets away with it from the immigration officials, too.

"That's how Scotland Yard figures it, after exhuming the body of that air raid victim at my request. Yeah! But Sheep had changed more'n that in all those years in England. Grown much heavier. Gray hair. Glasses. Put on manners—"

"That's it," Johnny reared up on one elbow. "He'd put on manners. In Jed's bus to the Springhouse he told me he was from the Middle West. Never been East. But I got to watching him in the dining room; he wasn't eating like a Middle Westerner, or like any ordinary American. He was eating like an Englishman!"

"Like an Englishman?" Mrs. Briscomb peered.

Johnny chuckled, "An American takes his fork in his right hand, Mrs. Briscomb, and puts his knife down. But an Englishman holds his knife in his right hand, fork in his left, reverse of the American way, and plasters his food on the back of his fork with his knife. That's how our so-called Midwesterner was eating—manners of a British gentleman. He'd picked up the habit in London, and coming home he forgot to switch. Of course I never dreamed it was Colebaugh at first. I only wondered why a man just over from England would bother to put on this Middle Western bluff."

Mrs. Briscomb exclaimed, "Well, *I* never!"

"Me, either," Sheriff Dan's blue eyes rounded. "Johnny, you ought to give up writin' about criminals and go chasin' 'em."

"No, thanks," Johnny Harter declined. "You caught the guy, after all. I can't understand yet, if you didn't recognize him, how you came to stop him at the station."

"That large-size bill he give Abner at the ticket window. Abner brought it over to the lunch car where I was havin' breakfast; showed it to me. You know them big bills we used to have? Kind that was called in around twelve years ago when the Gov'ment issued smaller-sized?

"Colebaugh livin' over in England, naturally wouldn't know of it. Comin' back home, using traveler's checks, he didn't notice the difference. Only those big-sized ain't in circulation any more—wouldn't see one around in a month of Sundays, 'less someone'd been hoardin'. That's what I thought of when I seen that fresh, crisp, out-of-date bill, an' who but Sheep Colebaugh ever had money around here to hoard."

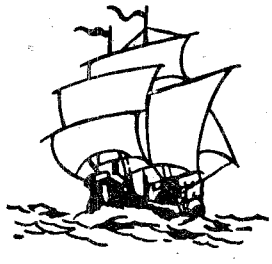
Sheriff Dan Whittier stretched his field boots and leaned back in his bedside chair. "Lucky he broke down and confessed when I asked about it, or we'd never got you out of that cistern. Bad customer, Sheep. Lived too much by himself up there on Lonesome Hill. Too solitary.

"Cunning, in a way, how he hid the money in that jug, waited all these years, then come back as a fisherman to get it. Nervy, too, hittin' himself over the head with a poker to make it look like self-defense, after killin' his brother. I'm kind of glad he jumped off the station platform, front of that freight train. Anyhow, I guess that clears up all the mysteries."

"All except one."

"What's that, Johnny?"

"I suppose now I'll never know." Johnny Harter's eyes were rueful. "It's something I've always wondered about, too. How the hell do they get those model sailing-ships inside those glass bottles?"



Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign

Of Tired Kidneys—How To Get Happy Relief

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

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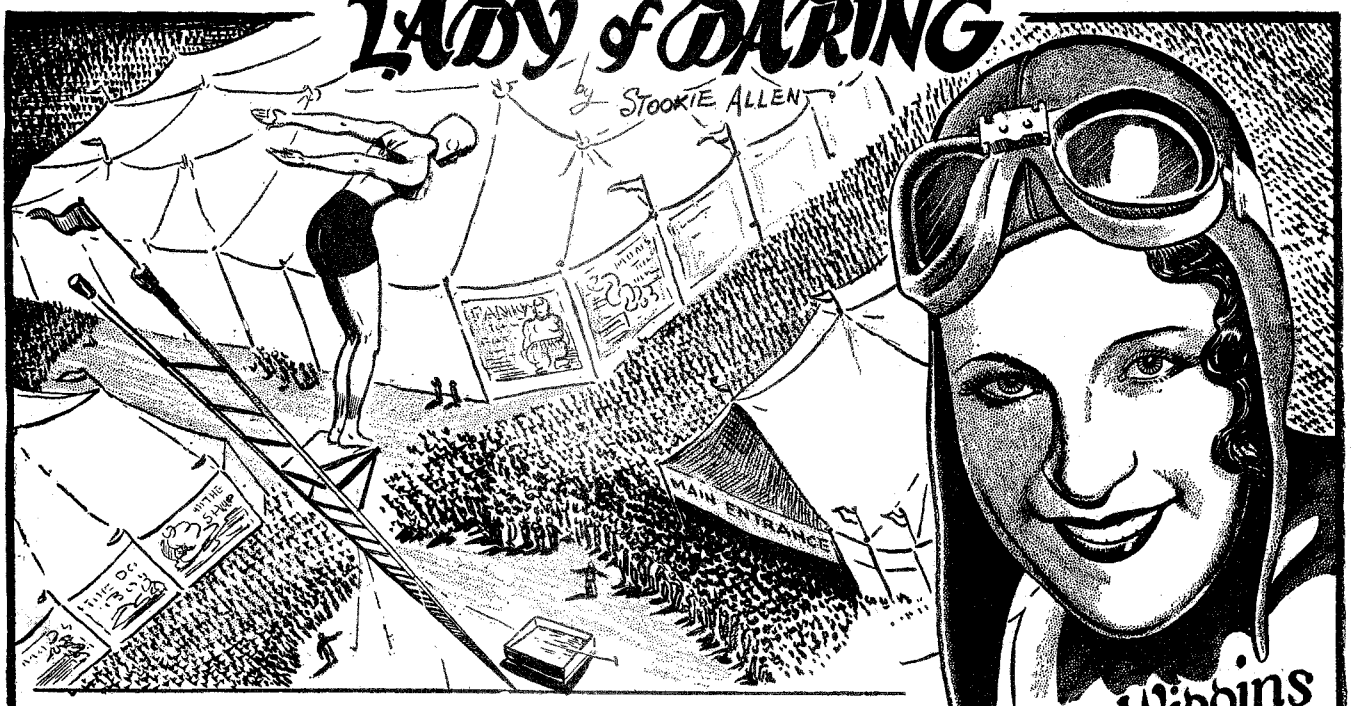
LADY of DARING

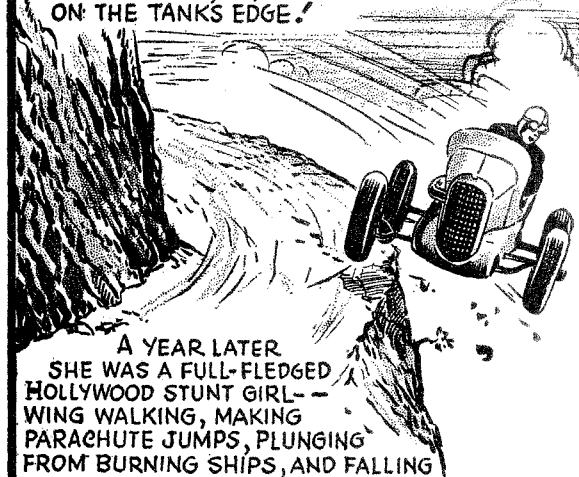
by STOOKIE ALLEN



Mary Wiggins

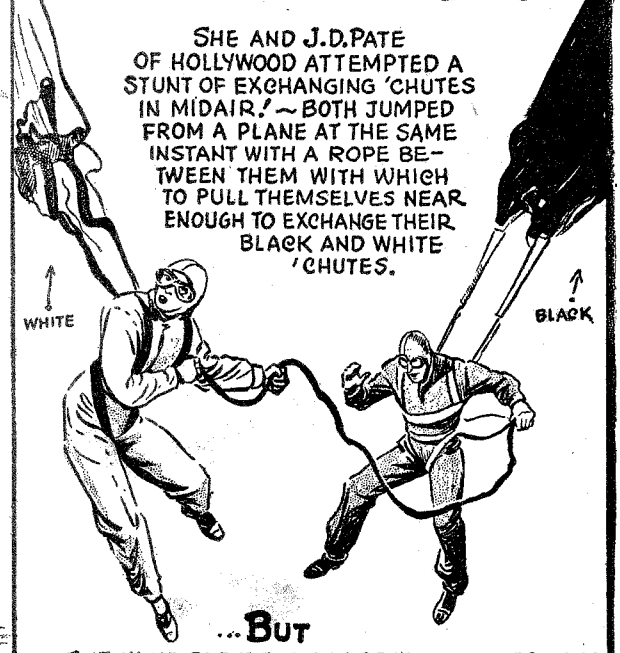
STUNT ACE

PRETTY MARY WIGGINS' JOB KEEPS HER ONE JUMP AHEAD OF THE UNDERTAKER — BUT SHE LOVES IT! MARY TAUGHT HERSELF HIGH DIVING IN TAMPA, FLA., AND AT 16 JOINED A CIRCUS AND DID A BREATH-TAKING DIVING ACT. THE CLOSEST SHE'S COME TO BEING FRIGHTENED WAS WHEN THE 5-FOOT TANK INTO WHICH SHE MADE HER 86-FOOT DIVE WAS ACCIDENTALLY SHIFTED A BIT. SHE REALIZED IT ON THE WAY DOWN BUT MANAGED TO TURN ENOUGH TO HIT THE TARGET, ALTHOUGH SHE LEFT SOME SKIN ON THE TANK'S EDGE!



A YEAR LATER SHE WAS A FULL-FLEDGED HOLLYWOOD STUNT GIRL — WING WALKING, MAKING PARACHUTE JUMPS, PLUNGING FROM BURNING SHIPS, AND FALLING FROM HORSES. STUNTS WITH RACING AUTOS ARE WHAT SHE LIKES BEST — SKIDDING, CRASHING AND TUMBLING OVER CLIFFS!

SHE AND J.D. PATE OF HOLLYWOOD ATTEMPTED A STUNT OF EXCHANGING 'CHUTES IN MIDAIR! — BOTH JUMPED FROM A PLANE AT THE SAME INSTANT WITH A ROPE BETWEEN THEM WITH WHICH TO PULL THEMSELVES NEAR ENOUGH TO EXCHANGE THEIR BLACK AND WHITE 'CHUTES.



...BUT THE WIND BLEW THEM IN OPPOSITE DIRECTIONS. THEY TUGGED ON THE ROPE ALL THE WAY DOWN. PATE RECEIVED A BROKEN SHOULDER, MARY — SOME BADLY BURNED HANDS.

WHILE DOUBLING FOR ANNABELLA SHE WAS BLOWN THROUGH THE AIR BY GIANT WIND MACHINES IN A SIMULATED SAND STORM. REMEMBER — IN "SUEZ?"

MARY HAS RECEIVED ONLY MINOR INJURIES DURING HER 10 YEARS IN HOLLYWOOD. SHE KNOWS HER BUSINESS.

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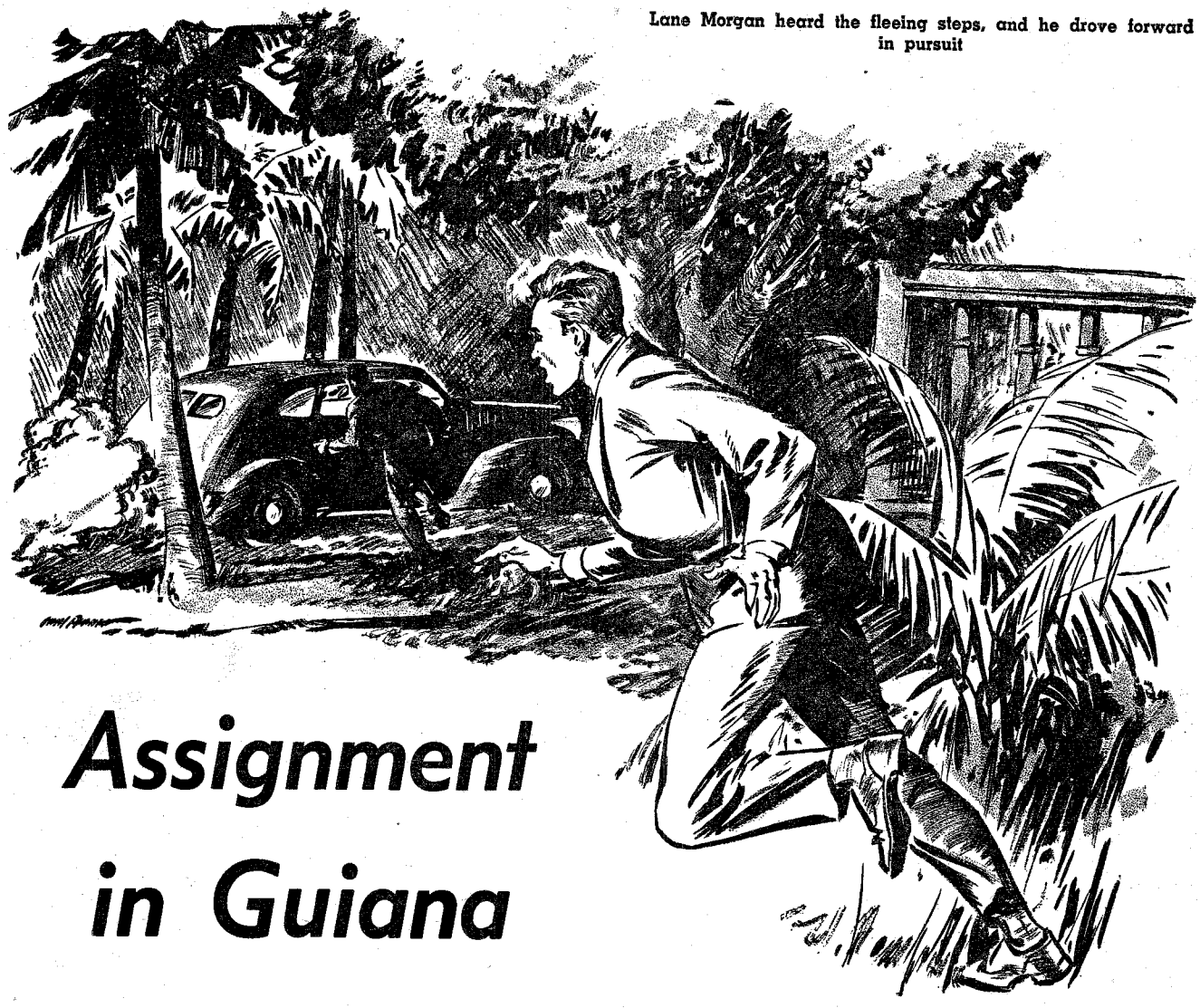

Lane Morgan heard the fleeing steps, and he drove forward in pursuit

Assignment in Guiana

By George Harmon Coxe

Start now this absorbing novel of mystery and peril in an exotic land

A rather baffling cable has summoned LANE MORGAN to Georgetown, British Guiana—a cable requesting his help and signed JOHNNY HAMMOND, who is Morgan's uncle. Arriving at his hotel, Morgan receives a message from a man named OSBORNE, asking to see him at once about his uncle. This, too, is curious, for Morgan, who knows something about his uncle's affairs, has never heard of Osborne.

But the surprises are just beginning. A native chauffeur comes to Lane Morgan's hotel room, with the explanation that a MR. ANDERSON, Johnny Hammond's manager, has sent him to fetch Morgan. But Lane senses that something is wrong; he stalls; and then the chauffeur pulls a gun to force him to come. A powerful young man, Morgan wrests the gun away, but the chauffeur manages to escape.

THEN Morgan receives his most staggering shock. From the hotel clerk he learns that Johnny Hammond died the week before—that he was shot. Out at Hammond's house Morgan meets the two people who were closest to Hammond: big, handsome KERRY SNYDER, his right-hand man; and a startlingly lovely girl named VALERY WARD, who was Hammond's secretary and protege. Valery Ward thinks that Morgan has come in answer to a cable from her, and though Lane never received it, he does not tell her so. He is determined to proceed cautiously.

Johnny Hammond was shot by someone outside his study window, according to Kerry Snyder, who had been conferring with him a few moments before his death. From INSPECTOR GOODSPEED, Lane Morgan learns that the police have got nowhere with the case. The chief suspects are the people who saw Hammond that day—Valery Ward, Snyder, HENRI GIROUARD, who was Hammond's lawyer, and a man who has not yet been identified.

But Valery Ward had no motive, and the lawyer Girouard has a time alibi. As for Kerry Snyder, he is to benefit by Hammond's will, but the fact that he knew Hammond was suffering from leukemia makes his guilt improbable, for Hammond had only a short time to live anyway.

DAPPER, pleasant Henri Girouard explains to Morgan the provisions of the will. Morgan receives a hundred thousand dollars; the sugar estate goes to Valery Ward; and Kerry Snyder inherits the rest of Hammond's many interests. According to Girouard, Hammond was about to sell six freighters, and now the buyer is waiting for Morgan's release to close the deal.

When Morgan enters his hotel room that evening, he notices at once an acrid smell, as if something had been burning. He has a premonition of danger; and a moment later he hears a sound that increases his tension. It is the sound of someone outside on the roof. . . .

This story began in last week's Argosy

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CHAPTER VI

WHO LIES DEAD HERE?

THAT flat metallic crackle—furtive steps on tin and the tin snapping back when the weight was removed. He had heard it before that morning when the gunman had fled. Such knowledge broke the spell and he whirled toward the rear window.

He took one quick step, that was all. Something tripped him and he fell forward, putting out his hands to save himself, hitting on his palms and making a bridge of his body across the object that had tripped him.

Then the flesh crawled on his scalp and something cold and terrifying slid along his spine and he knew that beneath him was the limp and unresisting body of a man.

It was many seconds before Morgan began to think again, but he remembered pushing up from the floor and running to the window. The tin roof was empty, its mottled surface glistening here and there from some reflected light.

Somewhere in the distance an automobile engine throbbed to life and faded into the night. Then he was turning, seeing now the darker blotch on the floor and stepping around it to find the light switch and snap it on.

The man lay on his back, one arm at his side and the other outstretched. The double-breasted seersucker coat had been opened and the white shirt bore two small stains on the left side, in the centers of which were tiny holes. Above there was a thin leather strap stretching to a shoulder holster under one arm. The holster was empty.

Morgan let his breath out. His body seemed chilled and numb, though the room was stifling, and suddenly he felt old and tired and stepped back.

Off to one side he saw the towel on the floor and picked it up. It unfolded as he lifted it and he found it full of charged and gaping holes; in one corner the name *Park Hotel* had been worked in red thread. He dropped it where he had found it and looked again at the man—a chunky figure neither old nor young, his face heavy in Death and peeling with sunburn.

A soft footstep startled him and he wheeled about, not realizing until then that he had not closed the door. Now a man stood there, a squat powerful-looking fellow of fifty or so with a leathery, wind-seared face, deeply lined at the corners of the eyes and nose. He had been staring at the figure on the floor; now he glanced up, his gaze somber and questioning.

Morgan, stirred to action at last, stepped past and pushed the buzzer once, holding it several seconds.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Well—I—" The man spoke in a rough, harsh voice, stopped, tried again. "Are you Mr. Morgan?"

"Yes."

"I'm Captain Doyle. I came here before and they told me downstairs you'd probably be back soon and—"

The sound of running footsteps checked him and a Negro bellboy knocked and pushed the door open. "Yes, sir," he said and then his eyes bulged and he paled two full shades.

"Get the manager," Morgan said curtly. "Tell him a man's been shot and to notify the police. Go on, now, hurry!" He had to shake the boy to make him understand, and half pushed him from the room.

"Now," he said to Doyle. "What did you want?"

"You're Johnny Hammond's nephew."

It was a statement rather than a question.

"What about it?"

"I used to be master of the *Hammondsen.* I was fired in Para and I came up to see Johnny and then he got shot and I thought maybe if I spoke to you—"

SOMEONE knocked at the door. Morgan opened it and Kerry Snyder stepped in, the easy grin on his blond handsome face fading as it slid past Morgan to Doyle, the eyes narrowing instantly and then slipping beyond to the figure on the floor.

"Hello," he said softly. "What's this?"

He spoke very casually even now, but Morgan had seen the quick transformation in his face from something mobile to a grave hard mask. For an instant his big frame seemed taut and stiff and then he was as relaxed as ever.

"Shot, huh?" he said. "Not you, Morgan?" And when Morgan shook his head: "What brings you here, Captain?"

"I'd come to see about getting my job back."

"Oh?" Snyder stepped around the body, looking down at it from another angle. "Who is he, Morgan?"

"I never saw him before," Morgan said.

"Neither did I. Not a friend of yours, is he, Captain?" Snyder did not look up as he spoke, but knelt beside the body and picked up a limp wrist.

"Hadn't you better leave things alone until the police get here?" Morgan said.

"I intend to. I just wanted to see . . . Hmm. Still warm. Couldn't have happened very long ago." He saw the towel and examined it. "What *did* happen? Do you mind?"

"I don't mind, and I don't know," Morgan said, explaining briefly what little he did know.

The big man listened thoughtfully. "You must have just missed him," he said. "And he used that towel to muffle the shots."

Morgan took a cigarette of his own, his feelings an odd mixture of weariness and irritation. Heretofore murder was something to be read about in newspapers and books and he found this unexpected introduction to the real thing new and strange and sickening.

"I suppose we'll have to wait," Doyle said.

"Right you are," Snyder said.

"You picked an opportune time to stop by," Morgan said.

Snyder tipped his head and surveyed Morgan with raised brows.

"Yes. Didn't I? As a matter of fact I stopped in to buy you that drink." He sighed and rose, stepping toward the door and looking at the buzzer card. "I could do with one, too. Mind having something sent up before the inspector gets here?"

DEPUTY Inspector Goodspeed arrived on the heels of the drinks, accompanied by a uniformed sergeant and a young-looking Negro in plain clothes who lugged a bulky case filled with the paraphernalia for photographing the room and taking latent fingerprints. By this time the manager was hovering about, shocked and voluble, and Goodspeed asked if he could use a vacant room. The manager said he could, and went off to get the key.

Goodspeed made a quick inspection of the body. "Shot twice, eh?"

"And one of 'em went right through him," the sergeant said, pointing to a half-buried slug to the right of the door.

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Goodspeed surveyed the room in a glance and took a position just inside the door. "Must have stood about here." He moved round the body until he was facing the door from a slight angle and perhaps four feet away. "And the killer stood here, firing as he entered. Hmm. . . . What's that, Sergeant?"

"A shell." The sergeant had picked up an empty cartridge case from the dresser and was inspecting the floor. "And here's the other one. A .32 automatic. Ejected to the right."

The manager returned and Goodspeed told the sergeant to call him when the doctor arrived; then he took Morgan, Snyder and Doyle down the hall to the other room.

"All right," he said when the manager had left, "what about it?" He took a notebook and a pencil from his breast pocket and sat down at a small table. "Who is he?"

"We don't know," Snyder said.

"You mean, *you* don't know."

"All right."

Goodspeed looked at Morgan, his little eyes fathomless but intent. "You don't know either? You never saw him before?"

"I never saw him before but — his name *might* be Osborne," Morgan said.

"What makes you think so?"

Morgan told him, explaining about the note that was waiting for him when he arrived that morning.

"Hah!" Goodspeed said. "Got the note?"

"No."

"What happened to it?" Goodspeed asked, grunting sardonically when Morgan told him. "We'll find the maid," he said. "Plain piece of paper?"

"It was Tower Hotel stationery."

"Ahh." Goodspeed stood up. "Wait," he said, and went out. When he came back, he had a short-barreled revolver in his hand.

"Found this under him," he announced. "American gun. Hasn't been fired. Whoever killed him stopped to search him. Nothing else on him. No identification, nothing." He put the gun in his jacket pocket. "Not that it matters. We'll find out soon enough now. There's a label in his coat from a New York firm." He turned suddenly to Morgan, his face grim. "Sure you never saw him before?"

Morgan flushed. "I've already told you—"

"Yes. Quite." He sat down and opened his notebook again, asking for details. Morgan told him what he knew; then Goodspeed turned to Snyder.

"Strange, wasn't it, your being johnny on the spot like that?"

"Just damned bad luck, I'd call it," Snyder said.

"You'd stopped to buy Mr. Morgan a drink, you say? Mr. Morgan expected you, did he?"

"No. I told him I would this noon. Casually, of course. I thought of it this evening and stopped to see if he was in."

"Um-hum. And how about you, Doyle?"

Captain Doyle repeated the things he had told Morgan.

"How did you know Mr. Morgan was Hammond's nephew?"

DOYLE rubbed his weathered chin. "Well, I just—I'd heard Johnny mention him and I knew Johnny was dead and figured Mr. Morgan would come down, with the estate being settled and all."

"I was under the impression that Mr. Snyder was the head of the shipping company."

"He is but—"

"It's this way, Inspector." Snyder was smiling now, his tone patient. "I discharged Doyle a couple of weeks ago. For drunkenness. I'd flown up to Manaus and came back down the river to Para to wait for the *Hammondsen*. She came in the next evening and when I went aboard I found him in his bunk, dead drunk. Luckily I found someone to replace him."

Morgan, watching Doyle, saw the man's face redden as though in anger. His mouth opened to speak and then Snyder had cut in before he could say anything.

"Suppose you come see me, Captain. Mr. Morgan's hardly the man to straighten out your troubles. If you can give me some assurance that you've learned your lesson I may be able to find something. I don't like to keep a man on the beach."

It all sounded very casual and reasonable, but somehow Morgan did not believe it was quite that simple. He did not know why, but somehow he had the impression that the explanation was meant to reassure Doyle on some subject not yet mentioned.

"Suppose we get on with this," Goodspeed said finally, and then there was a knock and the uniformed sergeant poked his head in the room.

"The doctor, sir."

"Oh, yes." Goodspeed said, "I'd like you to wait here for me, Mr. Morgan, if you will. You two can come along."

Morgan had spent a restless ten minutes when Goodspeed returned. Somehow the inspector's manner had changed. He took out a battered silver case and offered a cigarette, spun flame from a lighter.

"We've got an identification," he said. "It's Osborne, all right." He motioned Morgan to a chair, sat down and stretched his legs. "Why didn't you tell me you'd stopped to see him this afternoon?" he said calmly.

MORGAN had trouble getting words out because he had completely forgotten his visit to the Tower Hotel. "I'd forgotten," he said.

"The clerk described you rather well." Goodspeed pulled up his legs and leaned forward. "You didn't make any other effort to get in touch with him?"

Morgan shook his head. "I was busy for a while after that."

"You didn't phone him?"

"No."

"The clerk says differently."

Morgan waited. Goodspeed looked at him through lowered lids.

"What clerk?"

"The clerk at the Tower. It's the custom there when someone phones for a guest to ask who's calling."

"And I called?" Morgan heard his voice before he knew he had answered.

"Twice. Once this morning. The clerk connected you with Osborne. Again this evening. Right after Osborne hung up he left the hotel. He came here."

"No," Morgan said.

"You didn't tell him to come over here tonight? You didn't wait in your room, with a towel covering your gun to muffle the shots, and kill him when he entered?" He waited for Morgan's mute denial and stood up. "Well, someone did."

He moved away, turned and came back, his gaze cold and remote.

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"If it wasn't you, someone used your name. Someone was afraid of Osborne and phoned him this morning to prevent his seeing you during the day. He may have said, 'Don't try to see me until I call you. I'll call this evening and you can come over here—' Something like that. Osborne wouldn't know your voice."

"The note," Morgan said.

"The maid didn't take it."

"Someone looked over my room and found it."

"And knew he had to act. He must have been watching the hotel tonight, waiting, not knowing quite what to do until he saw you drive off. Easy enough to get up here without being seen, that side door giving on the stairs as it does."

"But how could he get in?"

Goodspeed laughed shortly. "Have you noticed these locks? The simplest skeleton key would do; you could practically pick one with your fingernail. . . . He was waiting for Osborne and shot him when he entered. He must have just finished searching the body when he heard you at the door and I dare say it's just as well your ride wasn't shorter."

Morgan stared dumbly, the significance of the remarks lost until Goodspeed said:

"Let's have a look at that gun while we're at it."

"What gun?" And then Morgan remembered.

"The one in your hip pocket." Goodspeed stood close as Morgan rose and reached behind him. "I thought so," he said. "Noticed it a while back. These light suits make it difficult to conceal things like that unless you've a holster."

He took the automatic from Morgan and stepped back, inspecting it with deft fingers and smelling of the muzzle. Some of the tautness went out of his face and his voice got blunt.

"It's a serious business, bringing a gun into the country, Mr. Morgan. You were asked about firearms by Customs. Why didn't you—"

"I didn't have it then."

"Oh, no?"

With an effort, Morgan kept his eyes unwavering and straight on Goodspeed's stony face; it was so conscious an effort that his eyeballs seemed to ache and quiver from the strain and tension of the act.

"No," Morgan said, and suddenly his voice was flat and hard. Without realizing it he had come to that boiling point that easy-going men have which, once reached, often makes them more difficult and stubborn than their more aggressive brothers.

He went over to the bed and sat down. He was going to tell Goodspeed a story, a fantastic story that he hardly believed himself. Perhaps it was the necessity for making such a story sound reasonable that angered him; perhaps it was a deep-seated feeling of guilt that told him if he had come sooner he might have been able to save for Johnny Hammond the few remaining months of his life; perhaps it was sheer resentment at this unknown killer who had forced him into this incredible predicament.

Whatever the reason there was a new thrust to his jaw and his mouth was tight. He was thoroughly fed up with the whole crazy business and tired of being pushed around.

"I see," Goodspeed said curiously. "Then suppose you tell me how you did get this gun."

"I will," said Morgan, and he did, his voice curt, incisive and resentful.

CHAPTER VII

CONFERENCE ON DEATH

WHEN Morgan arrived at police headquarters the following morning he was taken to Colonel Forsythe's office, but it was Inspector Goodspeed who rose from behind the desk.

"Ah, good morning," he said. "Sit down, won't you? The colonel has turned over his office to us temporarily so we'll have more room. Make yourself comfortable. The others will be here shortly."

Morgan sat down. "Others?"

"I've asked Miss Ward to come down—and Mr. Snyder."

"How does last night's business concern Miss Ward?"

"She may be able to identify Osborne. There's just a chance that he's the man we've been looking for—the one who called on Hammond the day he was murdered."

"Oh," Morgan said. "His name really was Osborne then?"

Goodspeed nodded. "We found out quite a few things since last night."

"But not who killed Johnny Hammond."

"Well, no." Goodspeed tipped back in his chair and looked ceilingward. "Hardly."

"What about that list you mentioned—those hypothetical suspects?"

"We've checked them all. Doyle and Snyder have no real alibis for last night—by the way, we're holding Doyle until we find out more about him—but Girouard was home all evening, and Atlock wasn't in town, so far as we know."

"Atlock is the manager of that gold claim?"

"Yes. Van Orman, the ship buyer, has a partial alibi and our other man—well, it may be Osborne. We have a fairly good line on him now. He worked for some outfit in New York—we've cabled them—and before the day is over we ought to know more."

"What was he doing here?"

Goodspeed shrugged. "That's one of the things we don't know yet. . . . Ah, here we are." He stood up as the door opened. "Good morning, Miss Ward . . . Snyder."

Valery Ward wore a beige linen skirt and a white jacket. Her face was grave as she said good morning to Goodspeed, and she bowed slightly to Morgan while the inspector arranged a chair for her. Snyder was in whites, a pith-helmet under his arm and a cigarette between his fingers.

"Hello, Morgan. . . . Any luck, Inspector?"

"A little," Goodspeed said and sat down again. "Mr. Snyder's told you about last night?" he said to Valery Ward.

"Yes."

"There's a chance you can help us."

He pushed a button on the desk and presently there entered the stocky sergeant Morgan had seen the previous night.

"It may be rather unpleasant for you," Goodspeed went on, "but under the circumstances necessary, I'm afraid. I'd like you to look at the murdered man and see if you can identify him."

"Oh." For just an instant she seemed startled; then the calmness was upon her again and she said, "Very well."

"Good. Sergeant Wixon will show you—"

"Like me along, darling?" Snyder said.

A smile of gratitude passed across her face. "Will you, Kerry?"

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Holding the will, Morgan said: "Let's give the killer a chance to show his hand"

MORGAN watched them go out, seeing only the girl, an odd excitement stirring in him as his eyes followed her across the room. When they returned he saw the trouble in her face and guessed the answer.

"Yes," she said.

"Ah!" Goodspeed's eyes were bright with interest. "You've seen him before?"

"He's the one who came to the house that day."

"Your description was vague then."

"I know. It was only a glance. I didn't pay much attention to him."

"But you're sure now?"

"Positive."

"Well," said Goodspeed, and looked very pleased with himself.

"But what does it all mean?" the girl asked.

"Yes," Kerry Snyder said. "Where are we now?"

"Osborne had some business with Johnny Hammond. . . . You never saw him but that one time, Miss Ward? Well, he's an American, as you know. He arrived here by plane on the tenth. His papers were in order and he stated that he had come for a holiday. If he could make arrangements he might go up the river and look over the country." He glanced at Morgan. "I wondered then if he might have something to do with that air base you chaps have laid out up the river."

He consulted a report on his desk. "He went to the Tower Hotel and registered, and on the next day, the eleventh, he left word at the desk that he was taking a trip—he might be gone several days—but that his room was to be held. We have no other trace of him at present until the nineteenth, the day you saw him, Miss Ward."

"And he's been around ever since," Snyder said.

"Exactly. . . . Come in," Goodspeed said as someone knocked. "Yes, Labord?"

A uniformed Negro stood at attention and saluted. "He's the man, sir."

"Good work, Labord! Thanks. . . . Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Osborne returned on the nineteenth—the day of the murder. He's been in and out of the hotel ever since, but until last night we had no reason to pry into his affairs. Yesterday morning he stopped at the Park and left a note for you, Mr. Morgan."

"And if I hadn't been late getting ashore—" Morgan began.

"How do you mean, late?"

Morgan explained how he did not get up until after nine. "Osborne must have been waiting for the boat. I didn't get off with the others. If I had—"

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"Yes, quite," Goodspeed said. "If you had you would presumably have met him, and he might well be alive now. We might even have the answer to Hammond's death."

"But how would he know?" Valery Ward said. "This Mr. Osborne? How would he know about Mr. Morgan? No one knew about my cable but Kerry and Mr. Girouard."

Goodspeed looked at her and his fingers drummed the desk top. When he spoke there was a special emphasis to his words. "I don't think Mr. Morgan ever got your cable."

"But—" Her eyes went wide and her lips parted.

"The cable Mr. Morgan got was sent by Osborne."

"What?" said Snyder.

MORGAN sighed and settled back in his chair. So that was it, after all. He'd had some such idea the night before when he remembered the similarity of wording in the note and the cablegram. Now he found his respect for the Deputy Inspector mounting.

"When did you send your cable?" Goodspeed asked.

"The next morning." Valery Ward was still staring. "Everything was so upset, so horrible that night. I didn't think about it until the morning."

"That was Friday. About when?"

"Ten or a little after."

Goodspeed looked at Morgan.

"I'd already left Boston then," Morgan said. "The message I got came the night before—around midnight."

"But mine—"

"My landlady must have signed for it," Morgan said.

Goodspeed picked up the cablegram that Morgan had given him the night before and showed it to Valery Ward. Snyder read it over her shoulder, then looked up at Morgan, his jaw hard and his sun-bleached brows bent.

"Why didn't you say so?" he demanded. "Yesterday."

"There were too many things happening that I didn't understand," Morgan said, and went on to tell of the attempted kidnapping by the East Indian. "Right after that," he said, "I find that Johnny's been murdered. I knew I hadn't received Miss Ward's cable and the one I thought Johnny had sent made it plain that he didn't want me to acknowledge it and perhaps tip someone off that I was coming."

"Osborne sent the cable," Goodspeed said. "The cable office was just closing the night of the murder when he walked in. I had the clerk brought in this morning. The officer who just spoke to me told me the identification had been made."

He tossed the cable on the desk. "It's obvious that Osborne had important information and he wanted to see Mr. Morgan before he did anything about it. . . . Well, I won't keep you any longer. Thanks for coming in."

Morgan stood up. Valery Ward was looking at him. He smiled tentatively but she did not seem to be aware of this and stepped towards him, her face grave and thoughtful.

"Now I understand," she said. "I'm sorry I didn't know. I had expected some word from you and—"

She broke off with the merest suggestion of a shrug and turned to Snyder.

"You have some things to do, Kerry?" she said. "Perhaps Mr. Morgan will drive me out." She turned, her manner polite but unsmiling. "You won't mind?"

"But I say—" Snyder began.

"Mind?" Morgan said. "No. Not at all."

"Thank you. If you're ready—"

She smiled at Snyder. He scowled at this summary dismissal for a second, then grinned and walked along with them.

"Right you are, duchess," he said. "See you later. Cheerio, Morgan."

CHAPTER VIII

PERIL IN WRITING

MORGAN parked the car in the driveway opposite the side door, and followed Valery Ward up the steps. "Yes, Alice," she said as a colored maid signaled her from the doorway and then backed into the room. "Pardon me," she said to Morgan and left him there.

She carried a legal-size envelope when she came back, and sat down near him. He studied her a moment, tracing the fine-boned profile, seeing in her all that he had ever desired in a woman and feeling now a curious hollowness inside which expanded and pressed against his heart until it hurt.

"You dislike me very much, don't you?" he said.

She gave no sign that she had heard. Nothing changed in her face and her gaze seemed fastened on the mango trees that overshadowed the servants' buildings at the rear of the house.

"Does that matter?" she asked.

"It does to me."

She glanced away. "I'd rather we didn't discuss that now, Mr. Morgan. There's something else." She moved the envelope in her lap. "But there are some things you have to know, and I would rather tell them to you before I give it to you. You have to know how I felt about Johnny Hammond."

"I think I know now," Morgan said.

"Father had known him before I was born. They had worked together once in Chile—Dad was an engineer—and later, when my father had an accident that crushed an arm and left it crippled, he decided to settle down and buy a plantation. He came to Demerara because he knew some people and while he was here he saw Johnny again. They talked it over, Dad and Mother and Johnny. There was a little money and Johnny had more and Johnny said he would advance it if the right place could be found.

"That's how it started. Johnny putting up most of the money and Dad working the estate. Sugar and rice did very well during the last war and they made money and bought more land and planted that. Then Mother died. We went to school here and by the time we were old enough to go away—Alan and I—there wasn't any money."

She looked out across the driveway. "So Johnny sent us to school, Alan to Cambridge and me to the States. It wasn't just that, though. Johnny remembered things. He never forgot a birthday or a Christmas."

"No," Morgan said, "he never did." And as the girl went on his mind folded quickly back through the years, and Johnny Hammond came to life for him again.

"When our house burned down—the residence at the estate—Alan and I came to live with Johnny. We thought it would only be temporary, but then the war came along and Alan got restless. I told him I could manage—we have a capable overseer in residence anyway—and off he went. Then Johnny broke his hip."

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Her voice got low and remote. "He had to depend on us then—Kerry and me. Kerry could look after the various businesses that needed attention and I brushed up on my shorthand and found myself a sort of confidential secretary. The hip was slow in healing and it wasn't long after that before I knew something else was wrong.

"He said he felt all right but his color was bad. Instead of turning brown again when he was in the sun his skin seemed to grow yellowish. I tried to make him see a doctor but he wouldn't; he couldn't be bothered. But he was never quite the same after that. When he finally did let them examine him there was nothing anyone could do but—"

She broke off, her lip quivering before she caught it with her teeth and stilled it. "I wanted you to know how it was with us. Because if I hadn't felt that way about Johnny I probably wouldn't be giving you this."

She was offering him the envelope.

"Open it, please."

HE tore off one end and took out two typewritten pages. "It's a will," he said.

"Yes. A later one. If you'd like to read it now—"

She started to rise and he put out his hand. "Can't you tell me what it says?"

She was sitting erect now, her hands in her lap. "The provision for me is the same as before. Kerry is to get a half-interest in the rubber acreage on the Amazon. The balance goes to you without reservation."

For a moment he could only look at her. A faint flush crept up her throat, tinting her cheeks, and then she was speaking again, her voice edged in defiance.

"I did not intend to give it to you at all," she said.

"You're in love with Snyder, aren't you? And this will robs him of all the things you think he should have." He went on before she could interrupt. "When was it made?"

"The day he died. That morning. He said there were things going on he didn't understand—maybe he was wrong—maybe he'd tear the thing up in a day or two but he had to be sure."

"Who knows about it?"

"No one but me. He put one copy in his desk and gave me the other."

"Why didn't he tell Girouard?"

"I don't know, I tell you." Exasperation twisted her face, and her voice was harried. "I suppose he didn't want anyone to know what he was doing until he found out about—about whatever it was that bothered him. Why should he raise a fuss if perhaps he was mistaken and was going to tear up the will later?"

"I see," Morgan said quietly, although nothing could have been farther from the truth. "And then he was killed before he could tear it up. So you don't think the inheritance is rightfully mine?"

"Oh, what does it matter what I think? I've given it to you, haven't I?" She hesitated and again the tightness came about her mouth. "But not because you deserve it. Kerry was the one he depended on, who did the work for him. But Johnny wanted you to come. You were his nephew, the only family left, and he wanted to lean on you a little while before . . ."

The words trailed off and she was blinking fast to keep back the tears as she went on.

"He didn't mind your not coming two years ago. He understood and thought it was fine you were getting ahead. But then when he wrote to you the last time—"

"He didn't say he had leukemia," Morgan said. "I could have come then but I—"

"You could have had the decency to answer him."

"I did."

He saw her turn. The mistiness was still in her eyes. There was a peculiar, surprised look, too, as if she did not believe him. "What happened last night made me change my mind. This morning, I knew I was wrong." Her voice grew faint and small. "Someone killed Johnny and that other man. I was afraid and bewildered when I realized that Johnny must have been right in whatever it was he suspected. Johnny had made that will and signed it and he had trusted me. That was something I could never escape and so—now you know."

HE heard her out, sensing the note of finality in her words, as though the discussion were ended. But it wasn't ended for him because he could not shake off the hot pressure of his shame.

"You think I'm pretty much of a louse," he said. "And now I'm going to show you just how right you are. You're not the only one who used to be fond of Johnny Hammond."

He looked out over the yard and memories came tumbling to his assistance. "All boys have heroes, Miss Ward, and Johnny was mine. He was my mother's brother and I can see her now, frowning over his letters and condemning his way of living while father argued and took Johnny's side. Every two or three years he'd show up and she'd scold him and try to reform him, and he'd laugh off her warnings and be on his way."

He glanced at her. "You mentioned his not forgetting birthdays and Christmas. That's what started me thinking. My room was filled with presents from Johnny—colorful hats and carved war clubs, and bows and arrows, and boxes made of rare woods with secret drawers. And every birthday there would be another box, cotton-packed and holding a twenty-dollar gold piece."

A crooked grin passed across his mouth as he paused and waited for his memory to jog on. "It was like that all through prep school too, but after I'd started college my views began to change. Such hero worship seemed a little childish. Once in a while I'd get a note with a fifty-dollar draft and he'd say he'd made a couple of dollars on a horse trade and go buy myself a time. So—until yesterday—I'd pictured him as a small-time adventurer, living by his wits and liking it."

He hesitated and went on stubbornly, a bitterness in his voice.

"I remember the last time I saw him. About four years ago, I think. He'd flown to New York on some business and he insisted that I come down for a day and night of fun.

"Did you say I was smug? I'm afraid I was, and impressed with my own little success and importance. Oh, I was considerate, I hope, but all the time I guess I was a little ashamed of the quiet man beside me with that brown, lank body and the tight, ill-fitting dinner jacket."

He found his voice husky, and stopped abruptly to find her watching him. She sat very still and there was something in her eyes he had never seen before, a curious softness which he had no time to analyze, for hard on the heels of his thoughts of Johnny there came the challenge, tapping him gently on the shoulder and demanding attention as it asked: *You've got two choices, Morgan. Which is it going to be?*

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"Put that gun down, you fool," Morgan snapped at the terrified Negro. "Help me to get Miss Valery to bed"

The first, he saw, was simple: To hurry down and turn over the will to the lawyer, and lay claim to the estate which was rightfully his, and catch a plane back home. That was the sensible thing for a man of his background: get his and get out while the getting was good.

The second choice was another matter. Johnny Hammond had left him a fortune and had perhaps been murdered because of it. That fact tacked a lot of strings on that fortune, and though he could not help Johnny now he could not ignore the obligation implied: that he must do what he could to find the murderer of Johnny Hammond.

THAT'S all there was to the challenge. Get yours and get out, taking care of your conscience as best you can, or stay and perhaps lose everything, but always knowing that you had tried to pay off for Johnny. There you are, Lane Morgan, take it or leave it.

Well, he was taking it, and having made up his mind, he grunted softly, not realizing it until he heard the girl say:

"I beg your pardon?"

"I was thinking," he said. "I've a hunch it might be as well to keep this to ourselves for a while." He tapped the envelope and put it in his pocket.

"But—why?"

"If no one else knows about it there's a chance that—"

"Someone else does know."

He peered at her. "But you said—"

"I know." She looked down at her hands. "That is the original. There was the copy. It's gone."

"Wait a minute." Morgan leaned toward her, a sudden tension striking through him. "Where was the copy?"

"In his desk."

"Who could have taken it?" Most anyone, she told him, and he said, "Who was here the night of the murder? Afterward, I mean?"

"The police and Kerry and Henri Girouard . . ."

"Girouard could have taken it then."

"But he didn't. It was in the desk the following morning. I don't know just when it disappeared but it was gone yesterday."

Morgan stood up. He wasn't ashamed any more, not worrying about what Valery Ward thought of him. His mouth was a thin hard line and his face was taut across the jaw.

"We don't tell anyone, understand?"

She looked up at him. "But is that quite fair?"

"To whom?"

"Well, to Kerry and—"

"Who profits most when that will is destroyed?"

She jumped up and he saw the swift red anger at her

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throat. "That's monstrous. Kerry didn't know about the will. He wasn't even in town when it was drawn."

Morgan brushed aside the argument, realizing he was being unfair but unable to stop.

"You've told me how much Johnny Hammond had done for you," he said. "He was everything that was fine and good to you when he was alive, but now it's different, isn't it? You don't care who killed him. You're quite content to sit back and accept the murder."

"I—I hate you," she said.

"I know you do. But I at least have some sense of obligation—enough to want to try to find who murdered him."

He broke off, amazed at himself, all logic telling him that he could hardly hope to do something alone that the police themselves could not do.

"What do you want me to do?" Her voice was quiet now, controlled.

"That depends on which is most important to you. If it's Snyder, I can have the will offered for probate and go home and try to forget it. I can't *make* you keep quiet about it."

"How quaintly put," she said.

"Whoever stole the will knows there's another copy. He'll be looking for it, or waiting for it to turn up. Let's give the killer a chance to show his hand. What have we got to lose?"

"I see." She moved to the rail and turned, returning his gaze with steady eyes. "All right then. It's all quite mad of course, but I meant what I said about Johnny and I'm sorry I lost my temper. I'll help in whatever way I can."

"Thanks," he said gravely, and went down the steps to his car.

CHAPTER IX

SHIPS FOR SALE

IT was just after two when Morgan climbed the steps to the glass-paneled door which said: *Henri Girouard—Barrister.* The outer office was presided over by a clerk and two stenographers, all three colored, and when he gave his name the clerk told him he could go right in.

Henri Girouard stood up and shook hands; then settled himself in a massive leather chair behind the desk and began to fill his pipe from a glass humidor.

"Well," he said, "things have been happening since I saw you yesterday." He shook his head and looked worried. "A nasty business. What do the police think? Have they definitely identified that chap Osborne?"

Morgan said not definitely, and he didn't know just what the police did think. "I haven't seen Inspector Goodspeed since this morning."

"They got me out of bed last night," Girouard said. "Wanted to know if I knew anybody by that name. I couldn't help them a bit. Still can't. Just what do they know about him?"

Morgan told what had happened that morning and Girouard, in the act of lighting his pipe, forgot to.

"Damned odd, his sending you that cable. Damned odd." His thin, swart face grew thoughtful and he felt absently of one end of his mustache. "That sounds as if he was very definitely tied up with Johnny Hammond."

He struck another match and sucked flame into the pipe bowl. Then he sat up and his frown went away.

"Now," he said briskly. "What about all those questions you had on your mind yesterday? Perhaps I can start you off by telling you just what Johnny had been doing lately." He tapped one index finger with the other. "First, and most valuable at the moment, are the Hammond Line ships. Old tubs all of them, small, eighteen hundred to three thousand tons, twenty-five or thirty years old—but valuable now because of the war. As I told you, he'd been offered eight hundred and twenty thousand—"

"I don't see how he can sell them at all," Morgan said. "This is a British colony and—"

"Ah, yes." Girouard smiled. "But Johnny Hammond was a very astute man. He guessed right on the war. A year before England declared it he had those ships transferred to Dutch registry, and the minute England moved and while Holland was still neutral, he transferred again to Vereguayan registry. We can sell to anyone we like. England wants them, Holland wants them, and I imagine, so do the Nazis. But we'll come back to them later."

He tapped his middle finger. "Second, a tin concession in Bolivia—a part interest in one, I should say. What it would bring in an immediate sale I could not say. Perhaps a hundred thousand pounds.

"Third, extensive acreage up the Amazon near Manaus. He got that land years ago in a trade of some sort. Do you understand anything about the cultivation of rubber, Mr. Morgan?"

"No."

"I'll try to make it brief. Until the early part of this century Brazil was the rubber center of the world—in some years as many as sixteen hundred ships called at Para alone. It now supplies less than one percent of the world output because millions of trees growing wild cannot compete with the cultivated product of Malayan and other Far Eastern plantations.

"There are perhaps a dozen varieties of trees in the Amazon area, the superior one being the *Hevea brasiliensis,* and Johnny soon realized that the only way Brazilian rubber could ever compete would be to clear out the other varieties, concentrate on the superior specimen, use scientific methods and machinery for speeding up the smoking process.

"He's been going at it in a moderate way for years. North American Rubber is down there now with a tremendous investment and millions of acres trying to find out if rubber can be made to pay again. Johnny thought it could. If he and North America are right that acreage will be worth a lot of money some day."

GIROUARD tapped his little finger. "The fourth business is mining gold right here in Guiana. I got him started in that. I'd been dabbling in claims ever since I got back from school. That's how I happened to become his legal advisor. Johnny would gamble on everything. He almost always had a partner. He'd put up the money and the partner would run the business. Well, I had some claims, one or two I had prospected, one I'd bought for practically nothing from two other prospectors."

He paused to suck on his pipe, found it out and laid it aside. "I got Johnny interested in one of the claims—I still have one of the others—and he advanced the money. That was ten years ago and we made a profit from the start. Some years more than others but the average last year was a net of about twelve hundred West Indian dollars a month." He smiled. "So you see it paid us."

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"I see it did," Morgan said. "Yes. Well about those ships?"

"If you care to wait," Girouard said, "one of the buyers will be in presently."

"All right. And while we're waiting, what about Snyder? Why was he favored in the will and when did Johnny make it?"

"Until about two months ago," Girouard said, "you were the principal heir. But he wrote you a letter." Morgan nodded. "And when you didn't answer . . . I beg your pardon?"

Morgan checked his protest in time. It was obvious now that Johnny had never received his reply and there was no point in repeating that he had written. "I was just going to say I remembered the letter."

"Yes. Well, as I say, Johnny was pretty hurt. Got angry I suppose, brooding about it, and one day he called me up. I questioned him at the time but he was impatient. Said Kerry had been with him four years. He was a good man and had been a big help in the shipping and rubber business so why shouldn't he be rewarded?"

"I see," Morgan said. "And who is Snyder? Where did my uncle pick him up?"

"He was a pilot. Some airline in Colombia, I believe. Johnny did a lot of flying and hired him. They hit it off pretty well and he sent him up the Amazon to take charge.

"It was a tough job for a white man, stinking with malaria, nothing left of Manaus but the remains of the earlier boom—the forty million dollar docks in disrepair, the opera house closed. Well, Kerry took hold, cleared out undesirable species, kept a gang on the job, stayed there on and off for two years. It made a hit with Johnny."

"I can see it would," Morgan said. "And I guess that answers my question."

MORGAN realized that the Negro clerk opened the door and announced some one. Then Girouard was rising and a round-bodied, ruddy-faced man was entering, a white pith-helmet in one hand and the other busy mopping his brow with a handkerchief.

"Come in, Conrad," Girouard said. "This is Mr. Morgan—Hammond's nephew. Mr. Van Orman."

Van Orman extended a damp plump hand and bowed. The top of his head was bald and shiny. He wore a white suit and with it a white, matching vest, across which was draped a heavy gold chain. His blue eyes looked oddly magnified behind his thick-lensed glasses and gave the impression that he was staring whenever he looked at you.

"Mr. Morgan," he said, coming to the point directly as he drew up a chair, "what about my ships? Are you going to contest the will?"

The words came in a thick accent and Morgan wondered about it as he glanced at Girouard. "I wouldn't have much chance of breaking it if I wanted to, would I?"

"I doubt it."

"But if you tried"—Van Orman nodded to indicate Girouard—"I am told it would tie up the estate. And time is the important thing now. Mr. Hammond intended to sell those ships. The papers were drawn before he was killed."

"In your name?" Morgan asked.

"No. That was to be filled in and—"

"I'd better explain," Girouard said. "There is still another buyer to be heard from. The representative of an English purchasing commission came through here looking for ships some months ago. He offered Hammond six hundred thousand but at that time Hammond didn't know about the leukemia and the offer was refused.

"But Johnny was pro-British, naturally, and he said that should he change his mind, this man—Laughlin, was his name—would have a chance to bid. And he kept his word. He sent a cable off to Laughlin the day he died. I should hear from him—"

"He is in town now," Van Orman said. "At the Park."

Morgan thought of the will in his pocket and there came to him other questions that he wanted answered.

"How will you use those ships, Mr. Van Orman?"

The blue eyes were staring at him again. They moved to Girouard. The lawyer nodded.

"Tell him. He can be trusted."

Van Orman bunched his lips and hesitated. "I hope so, Mr. Morgan. I hope so. I should not like my business known. You see, I am a Hollander. I represent a trading company in Vereguay. I am buying these ships for inter-coastal trading—supposedly. Instead they will, shortly, ply the Pacific, doing the same job for us that they would do for England."

"But Holland—" Morgan began.

"Is overrun with Germans, yes. But do not forget the Netherland Indies, Mr. Morgan. The bulk of our navy is there and my countrymen are working night and day strengthening our bases at Batavia and Soerbaja. But we need ships too. Freighters like these."

He mopped his bald spot and crumpled the handkerchief in his pudgy fist. "If we can not buy those ships, then England must. Mr. Snyder is ready to sell—to me I think, unless Laughlin's offer is the best. I do not think it will be after I have satisfied him as to my intentions."

He rose abruptly, picking up his hat.

"The point is, Mr. Morgan, can either of us buy those ships—and when? Time is the thing. The papers are ready. Mr. Snyder is ready to sell"—he turned quickly to Girouard—"subject to Mr. Girouard's approval."

"Yes," Girouard said. "It's this way. It takes time to probate a will, Mr. Morgan. But Hammond left me the power to sell or lease any part of his holdings if it proved necessary or advisable. So long as I am satisfied that he would approve of a bargain I can make it."

"And," said Van Orman, "you *are* satisfied—or will be when you have talked to Mr. Laughlin." He turned to Morgan. "You see? A matter of signatures. Five of the ships are already at Puerto Loya in Vereguay; the sixth is tied up at the Ward jetty up the river ready to sail at once in ballast."

Morgan nodded and stood up.

"I'd like to have a chance to think things out," he said. "I don't want to hold you or Mr. Girouard up, but you still have to hear from this man Laughlin so another twenty-four hours cannot be too serious. Unless I change my mind by tomorrow night I shan't stand in your way."

Van Orman waited a moment before speaking. Morgan saw he wanted to be very careful.

"That will have to do, then," Van Orman said. "If I have seemed unreasonable you must forgive me, but I have been waiting for so many days. Mr. Girouard insisted we wait for your arrival—"

He broke off with a sigh and clapped on his hat. "Thank you. Thank you very much." He shook hands, bowed, and was gone.

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CHAPTER X

SINISTER PERFUME

AS soon as Lane Morgan got back to the hotel he took a chair in one corner of the lobby and opened the envelope containing the will. When he saw the signatures he whistled softly, and stared off into space. Valery Ward had been one witness; John H. Doyle the other. Captain Doyle? But why not? Doyle had called to see Hammond that morning.

He grunted softly, went over to the desk where he borrowed another long envelope and sealed the will inside. When the clerk had deposited it in the office safe, he went down to the bar and ordered a whisky and soda.

There was no one else about and he went over to a table, sipping his drink and trying to assemble into some sort of a recognizable pattern the threads of information that had come to him. He was still at it—and his second drink—when a familiar voice hailed him and he found C. C. Caswell approaching his table.

"Ah, there," Caswell said. "May I join you? Walter, the usual, please." He sat down, ran his fingers through his sandy-gray hair and shot his cuffs. "Imagine my surprise today when I found out you were Johnny Hammond's nephew. I'd no idea, of course—supposed you were just a tourist or something of the sort. I really must apologize. I suppose you're down here to look after Hammond's affairs now."

"In a way," Morgan said.

"Frightful thing, what happened. Frightful." He made a clucking noise with his tongue. "And that business last night. Shocking. Who was the fellow? What was he doing in your room?"

Morgan said he wasn't quite sure. He realized that the news was common property now and told as little as he could and still satisfy Caswell. "I suppose you knew my uncle," he said as he finished.

"Knew him? Indeed yes. As a matter of fact he is responsible for my present low estate." He sighed and removed his pince nez. "I say he's responsible but the fault was really mine. If I'd had any idea—but of course I didn't at the time hadn't really seen that side of him."

Morgan waited. Walter came up with his tray and pitcher, set it down, manipulated the swizzle stick for a few seconds and poured the drink.

"The fact is," Caswell said. "I worked for Hammond."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Until then I'd always been a Colonial Service man. A schoolmaster. I went out to Nigeria first, spent many years there—until my health had gone and it became a question of getting a transfer or of being buried there."

He removed his pince nez and polished them. "I was assistant to the Head here." He put the glasses on and screwed them into place by wrinkling his nose. "I don't know whether you know, but Hammond never used Georgetown as more than a sort of central bureau. By that I mean his various enterprises had been set up under the countries in which they were located.

"The only business he had here was a gold claim, but Georgetown was central and he had an office—a force of four or five at that time. This was years ago, before Snyder took charge. Well, he offered me the job of chief clerk and I took it."

"I see," Morgan said. "And it didn't work out?"

"On the contrary. It worked out admirably. I dare say I'd be well fixed now if I hadn't made one little mistake. Yes, one mistake. I was short in my petty cash account. He discovered it." He made an abrupt harsh noise in his throat. "I very nearly went to prison."

Morgan put his glass down quietly and signaled for drinks, watching Caswell's blue-veined hands slide out on the table and clasp together, seeing again the frayed cuffs of his shirt.

"I'd never had any idea," Caswell said, "or I wouldn't have done it. I was responsible for that account and at the end of the month it was always correct to the ha'penny. It was a matter of three pounds as I remember. I was short and took it, intending to replace it as I'd done before from salary, but this time I never had the chance.

"He was a hard man in some ways, Hammond. Sharp but fair, took pride that his word was his bond—that sort of thing. But I found out he was most unreasonable toward anyone who violated his trust, most unreasonable." He opened his hands in a gesture of resignation. "He would have had me up for it if it hadn't been for Mrs. Caswell."

He paused, his mouth tightening and a glassy hardness shining in his watery eyes. "I was wrong of course. It was his privilege, but he could have been decent about it. As it was, I was finished here. They finally gave me this position. . . . Am I talking a lot?" He glanced up apologetically. "I'm afraid I am. Ah, here's Walter. Well, chin-chin, Mr. Morgan."

DINING alone gave Morgan plenty of time to think, and before he had finished he knew he had to see Valery Ward again. Remembering some of the things he had said that morning, he did not expect to be particularly welcome, but he could stand that so long as he had a good excuse for calling on her. He thought of two.

For one thing he could ask her about Captain Doyle and how he happened to be a witness to the will. Also, now that he was the principal heir, he could ask to look over his uncle's papers. This was how he rationalized the need for a visit, but behind it all it was simply the desire to see her again, to hear her voice and watch the play of emotion in her lovely face, that took him out to the phaeton and headed him for Johnny Hammond's bungalow.

Approaching the house, he saw that what light there was came from the corner opposite the living room, and as he slowed down he thought of Kerry Snyder. The possibility that he might be here was a jolt to Morgan's anticipation, but he had no intention of turning back now, and parked opposite the front path, dimming his lights. Then, as he got out and slammed the door, a car horn blew three times in quick succession.

The sound startled him because he had seen no car. He took a step or two up the path. A motor roared in quick acceleration, died away, roared again; then he saw the sedan—out on the side street and partly blocked from sight by the corner of the house.

For a second or two he stood there, puzzled, a feeling of tension sliding along his muscles. Then some impulse made him start for the side of the house. He cut across the lawn, dodging a low-hanging tree and presently he heard someone run across the veranda, a heavy, yet muted sound followed by the crunch of gravel as if someone had jumped to the drive.

He started to run. He was never sure whether he called

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out or not. He heard the motor accelerate again as he angled into the drive and then he knew that up ahead someone was running hard.

Keeping to the drive he pounded on, the crunch of gravel under his own feet drowning out the steps ahead. He saw the sidewalk looming up and as he gained it gears clashed and the motor roared. He saw, then, the figure on the runningboard, clinging there as the car shot ahead with lights out.

He yelled and kept running, sprinting clear to the corner before he realized the hopelessness of the chase, hearing the door slam, the throbbing of the motor as it settled down in high gear. He slid to a stop, breathing hard. For another moment he stood there, his heart pounding and confusion in his mind; then fear struck through him and he turned and sprinted back to the house, a torment of suspense driving him recklessly.

He fell once going across the yard and was up again without knowing it. He took the side steps in two leaps, barged through the open door and slowed down, calling:

"Miss Ward! Valery!"

THE light across the hall drew him on, but the small room from which it burned was empty. Beyond another open doorway was darkness and he went in, calling softly this time, trying to penetrate the shadows as he groped for a light switch, stumbling over a chair as he found it.

This room was empty too and he came back to the hall, wondering what had happened, trying to tell himself he had the wind up over nothing. He looked down the long narrow hall, aware of other doors farther back. He started slowly along its length.

A faint, sweetish odor clung to the still air and he went along, aware of it but not thinking about it, not identifying it until he'd gone another step or two. Then it struck him like a blow in the face, and he said aloud, "Chloroform," and leaped forward, seeing now the open door and the white shapeless blotch on the threshold.

Somehow he found himself on his knees beside the limp form which lay huddled half in and half out of the room. He caught her shoulders, lifting them with one arm and supporting her head with his hand, the sweet, sickening odor clogging the back of his throat. He had started to pick her up when the voice hit him hard and hot.

"Stand back, man! Stand back or I shoots!"

The impact of the command was like a physical shock. Slowly Morgan's head came up. The lights were on now and he saw clearly the girl in his arms.

"Stand back, I say!"

Morgan looked around then, seeing the gaping muzzle of the shotgun, the scared black face behind it. Half hidden by the man, her eyes bulging, a fantastically colored wrapper held tightly about her, was Alice, the maid he had seen that noon.

"Put it down, you fool!" Morgan snapped. "Help me get her in bed."

"It's Mr. Morgan." Alice pushed the man aside. "Oh, Lordy! And Miss Valery." And she was beside Morgan stroking the girl's head and moaning. "Miss Valery—Miss Valery! It's Alice, child . . . Oh, Lordy!"

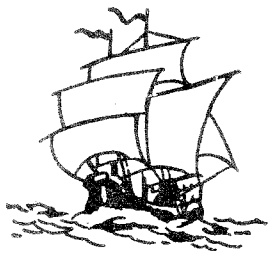
"Stop it!" Morgan spoke sharply to cut off the maid's anguished babbling. He got the girl in his arms and picked her up. "Turn that light on in there. Hurry, can't you?"

Alice reacted to the curt commands. She turned on the light. She was still moaning under her breath when Morgan lowered Valery Ward to the bed, and then she hovered close, straightening the negligee and dropping to her knees beside the bed.

The man with the gun still stood in the doorway and Morgan told him to get some brandy. The smell of chloroform was strong in the room and as he glanced about he saw the pad of gauze on the floor. He threw it out the window. He tried to light a cigarette but his hand shook so he dropped it. He heard Alice call the girl's name and stepped up beside her.

Valery Ward's eyes were open, frightened and bewildered eyes as they scanned the ceiling and the room; then she saw Alice and heard her voice and a smile came over her face.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



ROMEOS

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In the cell Dyn was playing three-card monte with a Communist and had just won the man's shoes

Short Novelet

Dynamite for Luck

By Louis C. Goldsmith

Author of "Decide and Blast," "Fools Fly High," etc.

The jailhouse was waiting for him and the cops were on the way; but none of that matters when a flyer has a miracle plane—and a special kind of reverse-twist luck

I

DYN KEEFE shifted uncomfortably in a leather chair scientifically designed and padded for smaller, softer bodies with baywindows. Sitting near him was the little dried-up, sour-faced twist of a man who owned his father. Lucus Krump, known in political circles as the 'king-maker', who had small blue marbles for eyes, was watching Dyn's father in an amused, paternal manner.

Senator Keefe paced before them, a strikingly handsome man with his thick silvery hair and his silvery mustache that was generous in size, and shaped as they shaped them in the gay nineties. That unique mustache had appeared in more news-photo pages than any other mustache in the country. It was a trademark. It was a damned nuisance, but it was worth fifty thousand votes any day. So said Lucus Krump, who had sternly forbidden its removal.

Senator Keefe paused to stare at one of the pictures of himself laying a cornerstone. The walls of his office were covered with pictures of himself laying cornerstones. Personally, Senator Keefe despised this business of laying cornerstones, though he preferred it to naming and kissing babies, one of the other many things that Lucus Krump demanded of him.

"Son," Senator Keefe paused to address Dyn, "you're twenty-six years of age. And what have you done with those years; what have you accomplished?" That rich, oratorical voice sank, trembling with emotion. "Dyn, you're nothing more than a well-dressed bum." The senator cleared his throat, glanced at Lucus Krump and the little man nodded approval.

Dyn was a peculiar young fellow in many ways and one of his peculiarities was the fixed idea that a son owed his father respect and obedience. "I've done a lot of flying," he said, in defense of those wasted years. "I've had a lot of fun."

Lucus Krump stirred in his chair. "Fun!" he spoke harshly, condemning the sin. "But what have you to show for it?"

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Dyn understood the other's question. Politics was a sideline with Lucus Krump, a requirement to his main object in living: the accumulation of money and more money. "Tomorrow," Dyn said, "I'll have a half-million dollars to show for it. Don't ask me how, because I won't tell you."

He said this carelessly and without any great show of pleasure and the other two believed him; first, because Dyn wasn't a liar and they knew it; second, because Dyn had so recently returned from the Orient, land of fabled wealth.

Lucus Krump's manner changed instantly. "My boy," he said with great affection, laying a withered, fawning hand on Dyn's arm, "I knew you had it in you. Your father all over. Yes, sir. And I know exactly the place to use that money. A government contract . . . making uniforms. Ah, there's money in those contracts, if you know the ropes. Depend on old Lucus Krump, m'boy. Just as your father has."

Dyn looked at his father's mustache and he looked at the pictures of his father, laying cornerstones. His heart was heavy within him, for surely his remarkable kind of luck had betrayed him into the hands of Lucus Krump.

THEY must have seen the return address on the envelope from Hoss Breton, and looked him up in the telephone directory. They were the finest bunch of cops Dyn Keefe had ever known in all of his extensive experience with cops and jailhouses.

The guy at the desk almost apologized for throwing him in the bullpen and if the two cops in the prowler car hadn't already, for Dyn's own sake, taken and hidden his silver pocket flask, Dyn would have offered the sergeant a drink.

"Now look," the sergeant pleaded, while he was taking Dyn's personal effects and listing them, "a guy who belongs to this lodge that you've got a card for don't want to stay in no lousy bullpen all night. Come on, big boy, cough up a telephone number for somebody to spring you."

Dyn prayed that none of them would connect his name with that of Senator Daniel E. Keefe. If they did his father would certainly disown him. Dyn had an old fashioned horror of being disowned.

"Come on, cough up a number," the sergeant wheedled. "You're a good sport and we hate to jug yuh, even if you have had maybe a drink or two."

Dyn Keefe wasn't drunk. Hell, he was going to fly a strange ship tomorrow, maybe. He knew that if Hoss Breton designed it it was bound to be a strange ship. Hoss was screwy, in a grand sort of way. Besides, Dyn never got soused when he was driving.

"Nope," he told the sergeant, "nobody's goin' to be drug outa bed at no two o'clock in the morning to save us from a night in the hoosegow. Besides, I like hoosegows. An' besides that guy, s'help me, was doing seventy miles an hour when he turned onto the state highway, inside the city limits. An' me just loafin' along, as the boys'll tell you."

The officer pointed to Dyn's club card for the City Athletic. "Now, brother," he reasoned, "what'd that swanky bunch say if they saw you in the bullpen?"

"They'd say, 'Hello, Dyn. How are you, Dynamite, ol' boy, ol' boy?' Only they probably wouldn't recognize me. I've been flyin' down around Celebes and Timor for the last three years."

The sergeant looked at his tall, wide-shouldered body, at his flat-cheeked face that was burned a dark mahogany from tropical suns and searing windblasts of a propeller. And at the hazel-green eyes that were steady, not the least bit frightened. The sergeant said, "from all I hear you oughta be playin' a harp with the angels. Don't you ever get scared?"

One of the prowler-car officers spoke hopefully: "That other guy *was* travelin' like hell, Sarg. You could read that in his tire marks. An' he sure didn't stop for the arterial sign. An' maybe he did have his lights off, like the big boy says."

The sergeant said regretfully: "But the big boy here admits he wasn't down quite to city speed. An' he couldn't a' been an' run ten feet up on the righthand slope of that cut, swerve back and jump astraddle of this other geek's hood, whose car rolled under him like a log, before this one come to a standstill on the other shoulder of the road."

"An' without hardly scratchin' a fender," the prowl car driver said, shaking his head with awe and disbelief at what his own eyes had seen. "You're lucky," he informed Dyn in a solemn voice. "Luck don't even start to describe it!"

"Lucky for other people," Dyn told him, having lived with himself for a long time and seen how things turned out. But he didn't mind. It was a lot of fun, being lucky for other people. And then he remembered the uniform factory that he was going to be buried in and he wondered if Lucus Krump would make him grow a mustache and lay cornerstones. This luck of his might not be so fine after all.

The sergeant sorrowfully beckoned the turnkey. He liked this big, chesty idiot. It was guys like him that kept a fella from believing the worst of life as a cop sees it day in, day out.

Dyn's smile had hardened. "This other guy," he began.

"He's in the emergency ward. Not as lucky as you, pal. Bad scalp wound and a busted arm, an' whatnot."

Dyn pointed a finger and now he wasn't smiling at all. "You check that man's license number, Sarg. An' you check his fingerprints. You hear me?"

Sergeant Grimes glared at Dyn's wide back as he strode down the steel-barred corridor ahead of the turnkey. "Why . . . why the infernal guts of 'im!" Sergeant Grimes sputtered.

II

HOSS BRETON was there before the creosote odor of the cell had had a chance to taint Dyn's hundred-and-fifty dollar gabardine that he'd had tailored for himself, along with a half dozen other choice suits, immediately on landing in San Francisco. It was all right being lucky for other people, but Dyn liked good clothes and when a little bit of his peculiar luck happened to splash over onto himself, he wasn't the sort to spurn it.

Dyn was playing three-card monte with a pack of greasy cards and long-haired Communist. He had won a half-pack of cigarettes and the Communist's shoes when he heard Hoss Breton's voice outside the bars. The Commy was a sucker for the turned-up-corner gag.

"All right, take off those shoes," Dyn commanded. He waved a careless greeting to Hoss Breton as though he'd just seen him yesterday, instead of five years ago when one of Hoss's screwy airplanes had almost been the death of him.

Hoss said in his uncertain treble that often dropped to a deep bass: "Thank Heavens, Dynamite, you weren't killed!"

"Don't be silly," Dyn told him. He gave the Commy's cigarettes to a Greek who'd had a little fistic family quarrel the night before with his wife, who didn't understand him. The Commy was sniveling something about when the revolution came, but under Dyn's cold eyes he finished taking his shoes off.

Dyn handed the shoes to the turnkey. "Give 'em to the Salvation Army," he requested. "Hoss," he said, "where's this airplane of yours that nobody'll fly? Has it got wings?"

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That was one thing Dyn was strict about. He wouldn't fly an airplane that didn't have wings. Otherwise he wasn't choosey.

Hoss herded his old Chev off the main highway, onto a graveled road. "Dyn," he said reverently, "I've finally got it—two of them, I mean."

Dyn could see, as they rattled by under the last street light, that Hoss's long upper lip was flopping violently over his square, horsey teeth. He had seen that excitement before, to his sorrow. That is, if Dynamite Keefe ever had time to feel sorry about the blood-chilling things that had pursued him through twenty-six eventful years. Years that were spent being lucky for other people.

"What d'yuh mean, Hoss, you've got two of 'em? You used to have more bats in the belfry than just two."

"I've worked out a geodetic design, Dynamite, that'll make a wooden airplane stronger than metal. And I've got a wing. . . . Dyn, have you ever thought much about wings; I mean wing sections, airfoil shapes?"

Dyn had, in a vague, off-hand manner, thought about wings. He recalled certain peculiarities about the wings on that last plane he'd flown for Hoss. They were wonderful for lift at just a little faster than stalling. Above that speed they started to loop the plane. And after that they kept on looping it, no matter what the speed. And so tight were the loops that the vertical tail fin scratched your nose, trying to follow the wings.

"Yes," Dyn ruminated, "I've thought about wings, Hoss. But when I do I go out an' get drunk right away quick. So it doesn't bother me at all, hardly."

Hoss wasn't paying any attention. He'd gone into one of his fits. "Dyn, everybody's always thought about wings as being dragged over the air like a bobsled. Dyn, have you ever thought how crude that was? Have you ever thought about wings rolling . . . well, something like rolling pins?"

Dyn grabbed the steering wheel. Hoss was using both hands to illustrate this new wing conception. In his excitement his foot was jammed hard down on the accelerator. The front left fender of the Chev carried away the wood railing of a small bridge. Or the railing carried away the fender. It was a sort of a mutual get-together proposition.

HOSS retrieved the wheel from Dyn and turned into a long, weedy cow pasture. Ahead of them was a corrugated iron hangar that sagged dismally in the middle and looked as if it would fall down if somebody knocked his pipe out against it.

"Well, we're home, Dyn," Hoss said cheerfully and trying to sound careless. He made a quick duck out of the car, because Dyn was impulsive and he was as fast as greased-lightning.

But Dyn had caught him by his coat collar and lifted him, despite a frantic wriggling, back into the car.

"Whata you been doing with those royalties?"

Hoss's voice turned to a deep bass. That meant that Hoss was pretty badly scared. "I sold the patent rights, Dyn," he rumbled. "Wait'll you see what I did with the money."

Dyn wondered if there was any specific law against murdering a screwy airplane inventor. He could drag the body into that hangar and set fire to the whole works. Nobody'd be apt to find out.

But he kind of liked Hoss. He'd always had a weakness for screwy people like Hoss.

"Hoss," he said, "five years ago I flew a plane for you that wouldn't do anything but loop. It was positively the loopin'est airplane that ever was or ever will be. So I crash with it in an amusement park near Salem an' a big shot who manufactures amusement-park devices begs me for the right to build it on a royalty basis."

Hoss's moan of fear was such a deep bass that it was below the auditory level of the human ear.

"So," Dyn continued, "you're on easy street for life because those wings of yours on a small, whirling airplane make the most sensational amusement device of the ages. People lined up for blocks to ride in 'em an' the guy sold 'em like hotcakes. Now," he ended, shaking Hoss until Hoss's voice got high enough in the scale to be heard, "you talk an' talk fast, you horse-faced screwball!"

Hoss pointed a trembling finger toward the hangar. "It's in there, Dyn. It's the most wonderful thing that's ever happened in aeronautical engineering. I can say that in all modesty because it was an inspiration."

Hoss's voice lifted to an ecstatic treble. "The spirits of Archimedes and the Wrights and Langley and Bleriot and a host of others whispered it to me one night when I had a toothache and couldn't sleep. Come on, Dyn," Hoss begged, pulling on Dyn's arm. "You'll be willing to invest your whole fortune in it after the first look."

Fingering the tiny, jade good-luck piece and the twenty-dollar bill in his otherwise empty pant's pocket, Dyn followed Hoss into the gloomy depths of the hangar.

Hoss found the electric light switch and Dyn blinked at the gleaming lacquer of a new airplane.

IT WAS a thing of such utter beauty that Dynamite Keefe stood transfixed, his throat tight with his emotion. He couldn't say anything. There weren't any words fit to describe the lovely, ethereal, flowing wonder of it.

Entranced, spellbound, he let his feet carry him over to it and he put his arm around the curving fuselage and laid his cheek against the satiny finish of the turtleback. He wanted to cry.

"This one won't be fast," Hoss said, with the honesty that kept him a poor man, "but it'll lift weight, Dyn. And it'll perform. And for a half-million dollars I can build a four-engined bomber that they'll *have* to recognize."

Dyn's first emotion had passed, so that he could trust his voice and wasn't afraid any longer of drooling with rapture. "If it's a wooden airplane, Hoss, the U. S. services wouldn't even smell of it. They got metal on the brain."

"But the English will," Hoss said triumphantly. "They're using spruce in some of their bombers right now."

Dyn looked around at the packed dirt floor of the old hangar, which was littered with wood shavings and newspapers and oily rags and milk bottle caps and thin strips of spruce that had been discarded because the grain wasn't absolutely true. "Hoss," he said in a frightened voice, "we gotta clean this place up. Right now!" He stooped for one of the newspapers. "It might burn up. Even with my luck, Hoss, it might somehow catch fire."

Hoss looked around in a startled, awakening manner, as though for the first time in years he was seeing something in the old hangar besides his dreams and their fulfillment.

"Did you build this all alone?" Dyn asked, raking litter up onto the newspaper, using it for a dustpan.

"All alone," Hoss agreed.

Dynamite didn't hear him. He was suddenly seeing the black screamers across the newspaper: MAYOR KILLED IN AUTOMOBILE CRASH!

"But the son-of-a-gun was doing seventy miles an hour!" Dyn claimed in self-defense, before he recovered from that first shock.

"What'd you say?" Hoss said.

Then Dyn noticed the date-line on the paper. The newspaper was three days old. With a sigh of relief, he squatted on the floor, his eyes devouring the page. His own accident last night, had been similar, except that nobody had been killed. He said: "One of the nicest things about the good old U.S.A., Hoss, is that the newspapers don't cover their whole front page with obituaries and beauty-parlor ads.

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"Listen to this: 'Furniture tycoon not seriously injured by deputy's gun . . . posts quarter-million dollar reward.' And listen to this, Hoss: 'Lipstick bandit attacked by enraged chorus girls'." Dyn hugged the dirty newspaper to his immaculate foulard tie. "Home!" he said rapturously. "Home . . . where deputies shoot furniture tycoons and chorus girls club bandits!"

Hoss trebled, "Poor guy! They oughta boil 'em in oil."

Which confusing statement passed over Dyn's head. He was reading again: MAYOR KILLED IN AUTOMOBILE CRASH! He read again the paragraph mentioning the indignation of the town's citizenry at reckless drivers, their demands that the police crack down on them. Dyn shivered a little. "Let's get this place cleaned up, Hoss. I need a drink."

III

THERE was a small leanto built against the side of the hangar. One end of it was completely blocked by a plank table covered with blueprints and pencil sketches. A rusty, sheet-iron stove, with tea kettle and an egg-splattered, greasy frying pan decorating its top, stood near the door. Hoss's bunk, an airplane bucket-seat fastened to a nail keg and a draftsman's stool, completed the furnishings.

"You'll sleep in my bunk," Hoss told Dynamite, "an' I'll sleep on the floor." He ducked out to his car and returned with two bottles of Old Kentucky Beesting. "See," he held them up proudly. "I remembered that kind you like."

While Hoss was pouring the drinks, Dynamite fingered the twenty-dollar bill in his pocket and thought about Ruby Rouge and swore to himself that his peculiar kind of luck was bound to hold. With the odds they were giving on the red stallion, his thirty-thousand-dollar bet would build a four-engined plane for Hoss; he wouldn't be buried in Krump's uniform factory; and there would be enough over to pay the hospital bill for that guy he'd smacked on the highway.

"I wasn't good luck for him," Dyn muttered, under his breath. "But when a guy comes rammin' out onto a state highway with no lights an' doin' seventy miles an hour, he's just askin' for sudden death."

Hoss passed Dyn a fingermarked water glass, amber to the brim. "You want some water?" he asked Dyn.

Dyn said, "No, I washed at the hotel."

Hoss lifted his glass: "Here's to a true prince," he rumbled, his voice getting out of control with emotion, his long upper lip flapping over buck-teeth. Moist, faded blue eyes worshipped Dyn.

Dyn didn't get it. "Here's to a prince," he acknowledged. "Only he wasn't a prince, Hoss. He was an old mandarin, of the yellow. Richer than Rockerfeller an' spendin' his dough like a drunken sailor, buying second-hand war planes for Chungking. That's why the Jap's kidnaped him from Hongkong."

"Kidnapers oughta be boiled in oil," Hoss blazed, with a violence that astonished his friend. Then he choked a little on his drink and looked surprised. "Say, what're you talkin' about?"

"About this old duck that I saved from those brown monkeys. I was flyin' for the Dutch outfit. Had a forced landing off the beach at Yai, Hainan Island. That's where they was holding old Sao Lee prisoner."

Dyn polished off the glass of Bourbon and smacked his lips. "Well, they didn't have him when I pulled outa there. But they got kind of riled because I took him, and machine-gunned the whole bottom off my hull so that I cracked up when I beached her near Kowloon.

"So the Dutch outfit fired me," Dyn finished contentedly, holding his glass out while Hoss refilled it, "and old Sao Lee gave me this ruby, as a small token of his appreciation, and a letter to a second cousin of his in San Francisco."

Hoss remembered now how Dyn was about things that he called "small details." He remembered about the speed plane that had developed wing-flutter while Dyn was testing it. "It didn't amount to anything much," Dyn had explained to the newspaper reporters. "The tips started hoppin' up and down, the control stick started tappin' on the insides of my legs. Then the right wing folded back onto the tail an' the left wing fell off. But the engine never missed a beat."

Dynamite was in the hospital six months from that, while they grafted yards of skin on his tortured legs. Skin that was furnished by old-timers who flew thousands of miles to make their very personal offerings.

"What ruby are you talkin' about?" Hoss asked patiently.

Dyn sneezed a couple of times, coughed once and then gargled. "That's Chinese," he said with considerable pride. "It means 'a tear of the weeping dragon'. That was the name of the ruby. It'd been in their family sixteen hundred years. Sao Lee's second cousin let that information slip out by accident."

Dyn finished off his second glass. "So," he concluded, "I couldn't keep a family heirloom like that. So I gave it back to the second cousin to keep for Sao Lee until the Chinese run those brown monkeys into the ocean for the sharks to eat. And the second cousin said I had to take this or he'd lose face."

Dyn took a rice-paper envelope from his pocket and showed Hoss a piece of blue paper, covered with Chinese characters.

Hoss blinked owlishly at the brushed pothook marks. He was beginning to feel the liquor and he was beginning to wonder which one of them was crazy. "It looks like a laundry slip," he said.

Dyn put it back in the envelope and put the envelope in his pocket. "It's thirty thousand dollars on the nose of Ruby Rouge an' it's backed by a white-man combine, working through a Chinese go-between. The combine is out to take the Chinatown gamblers. But they're goin' to be took themselves. Multiply thirty thousand by twenty. That's the odds on Ruby Rouge in the race tomorrow."

Dyn looked complacent.

"And how," Hoss asked, a sensible question for the average white man, "d'you know for sure that Ruby Rouge will win?"

"Because all the Chinks in Chinatown are bettin' on him," answered Dyn, with far more wisdom. "An' because if this second cousin of Sao Lee gave me a bum steer for a fifty-thousand-dollar ruby, he'd have to cut his wrist arteries an' his body wouldn't be sent back to lie with his ancestors." He extended his empty glass. "Hoss, whiskey don't age in a bottle."

HOSS filled the glass. "Here's to your test flight tomorrow," he said. He added, knowing the kind of luck Dyn carried on his sacred person: "An' here's to our four-engined bomber."

Dyn drank to that, staring over his glass at the wretched quarters. "Hoss," he asked, "where'd you get the money to bail me out? I know it was three thousand dollars."

Hoss pretended to be choking on his drink.

"Come clean," Dyn commanded, starting to get up.

Hoss's voice dropped to bass. "It was money I've got to pay on the engine, day after tomorrow, at the bank. Dyn, was that guy bad hurt?"

Dyn swallowed and cleared his throat. "Pretty bad, Hoss," he said gravely. "But the cops saw his skid marks. An' I'd passed them at the city limits. So they know I wasn't doin' more than forty."

Hoss shook his head. "Don't make any difference. If

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he's hurt bad at all, Dyn, a city jury'll send you up for a stretch. The mayor here was killed a few days ago in an automobile accident. They got blood in their eyes, Dyn."

"But he didn't have his lights on, Hoss!"

"The cops didn't see that. It's your word against his. Where's your car?"

"They held it at the police garage."

"You got any money, Dyn?"

Dyn squeezed the twenty-dollar bill in his pocket. The car agency hadn't exactly given him that super-twelve roadster. And a couple of trunkloads of clothes can't be bought for hay. "What are you gettin' at?" he demanded.

Hoss understood. Dynamite was a great hand to keep money in circulation. "Dyn," he said, "you're goin' to stick right here on this field. An' if we see one of those white-painted patrol cars coming out here, you're going to take off with that plane of mine an' head south for Mexico."

Dyn's lower lip was caught between strong, white teeth. He got up hurriedly and walked to the door and opened it. He stood in the cool night air, hearing the cheek talk of the frogs, smelling the grand smell of hay that's just been mowed.

He saw a funny looking little man humped over a drafting board, forgetful of the world, drawing deep from his subconscious, putting an airplane on paper; an airplane the like of which had never been seen before. He saw the long, horsey face twitch with a mounting excitement as he worked patiently alone through the months and years and saw that his dream had been good. So good that in his humbleness he must give all credit to the spirits of ancient aeronauts.

And he, Dynamite Keefe, who wasn't worth the powder to blow him to hell, was being offered that dream. Damn, it was wonderful to be lucky for other people! That is, people like Hoss.

"Let's go to bed," he said over his shoulder, in a husky voice. "But first let's have one more drink, Hoss. It's to *your* four-engined bomber, not *ours*. Y'see," he explained "if any part of it belonged to me, that funny kind of luck I have might be busted."

Hoss nodded wisely. " 'As right," he agreed solemnly. He hiccuped. " 'As right, Dyn. I hadn't thought of—" With the greatest of dignity he slid off the draftsman's stool onto the dirt floor, a contented smile curving his lips. Hoss never could stand much liquor.

Dyn picked his slumbering body up and tucked it under one arm, while he drank to that very important correction to their toast.

Then he tucked Hoss into the bunk, took the top blanket and rolled himself in it and went to sleep on the drafting table.

But before he went to sleep he thought distastefully of the thousands of shoddy uniforms Krump would have made him produce, and he wondered what had happened to the poor devil who had crashed the mayor's car. Then his mind dwelt for a vague space of time on the furniture tycoon who had been injured by a deputy's gun and had posted a quarter of a million dollar reward for something or other. A lipstick, with arms and legs, cringed fearfully under the threat of a thousand blond-headed chorus girls and a blood-red stallion cantered over the line a dozen lengths ahead of the field.

IV

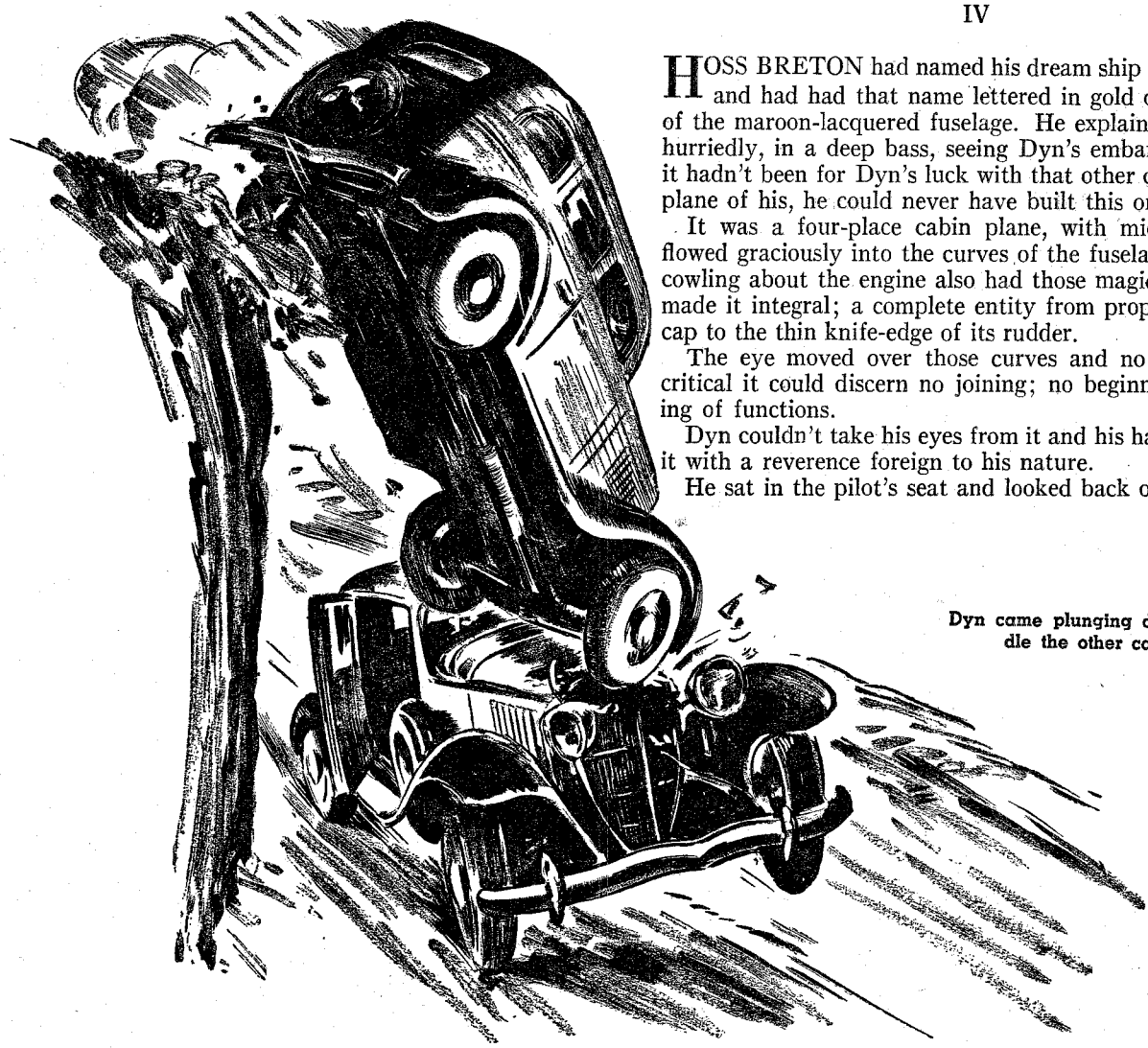
HOSS BRETON had named his dream ship *Keefe's Luck* and had had that name lettered in gold on both sides of the maroon-lacquered fuselage. He explained this away hurriedly, in a deep bass, seeing Dyn's embarrassment. If it hadn't been for Dyn's luck with that other crazy-looping plane of his, he could never have built this one.

It was a four-place cabin plane, with mid-wings that flowed graciously into the curves of the fuselage. The nose cowling about the engine also had those magic curves that made it integral; a complete entity from propeller spinner cap to the thin knife-edge of its rudder.

The eye moved over those curves and no matter how critical it could discern no joining; no beginning, no ending of functions.

Dyn couldn't take his eyes from it and his hands touched it with a reverence foreign to his nature.

He sat in the pilot's seat and looked back of him at the



Dyn came plunging down, to straddle the other car's hood

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three shabby, second-hand wicker chairs. And he looked at the pitiful display of instruments on the panel. He wondered how many cigar-chewing moneybags like Krump had seen only those non-essentials, their gross minds not comprehending the beauty of the ship's design.

Hoss Breton got into the cabin, leaning toward Dyn, his voice deep down and breathless. "What'd yuh think of her, Dyn?"

Keefe said gruffly: "I think she'll fly, all right, Hoss. And you mean to say that you couldn't get any pilots to test it!"

Hoss gestured toward the diagonal weaving of spruce. "It's this geodetic construction, Dyn. It's so new in this country! They said it was more like a clothes basket than an airplane. The wings are woven, just like the fuselage."

"I know," Dyn nodded. "I wonder if they stopped to think that an old-fashioned reed clothes basket is stronger than anything of its weight that is built with metal? Oh, well, I'm glad they didn't. Pull the blocks, Hoss."

It is slow work, testing an airplane properly. First the landing gear. Will it stand up under a normal run across the field? Then will it take the dead-weight impacts given it by crow-hopping? And the side-stresses of a drift landing that can be simulated with sharp turns?

Between these trials, Dyn taxied back to the hangar where they had to pull the countless safety pins on inspection doors and look things over and then replace the doors.

They forgot lunch completely; they forgot everything except the growing certainty that Hoss had built a machine that would make history . . . providing it was given half a chance.

There was the rub. According to Hoss's carefully worked out wing-section formula, his principle wouldn't show any startling improvement until used on a plane that was in the weight-lifting class, with wings thick enough to take the faired-in frontal area of radial engines; an airplane that would lift tons of dead-weight. Then and only then would it show its true efficiency.

But all Hoss needed to build such a plane was a half-million dollars.

DYN thought of that just once, as they were making sure of the panels, after a final inspection. He glanced at his wristwatch and was astonished to see that it was past four o'clock. "Hoss," he said, sure of his queer, twisted kind of luck, "Ruby Rouge has already won his race."

Solemnly they shook hands and Dyn climbed wearily back into the airplane's cabin and tightened his safety belt a couple of notches, so that it was firm across his extended legs.

He wouldn't be able to time it on this first take-off. That must come later, after he had learned all of its tricks. For every plane has its little tricks, its individual personality, as any pilot knows unless he's a ham-handed knot-head.

Dyn wheeled to the extreme lee-end of the field and turned to face the wind. He sat for a time, his eyes traveling over the upward, dihedral slant of the wings. His instincts might be completely wrong in this matter. Those wings were a complete departure from any conventional section he'd ever seen. The C/P travel might be crazy as a loon, just as it had been in that looping monstrosity that he'd flown before.

Hoss had shown him the rig that he used on his old Chev to get wing-tunnel data. But a small-model plane dragged through the air that way could give a lot different results than a full-scale airplane. He might lift it off the ground a hundred feet and have a faulty center-of-pressure travel kick him into a nose-dive that he'd never pull out of. The hundred feet nearest the ground are the most dangerous in flying. It isn't the fall that hurts a man, it's the sudden stop when he hits the ground.

Dyn set the brakes and slowly opened the throttle. He checked his ignition, scanned the instruments and looked to the stabilizer adjustment, making it slightly nose-heavy. He wiped moist palms on the legs of his pants. "Here goes," he muttered and removed toe pressure from the rudder brakes.

Dyn couldn't have told how many feet of run it took to get off. It seemed though that he had just released the brakes when the *Keefe's Luck* flew herself clear. Her wheels seemed to spurn the earth.

He had to keep the stick well forward. She wanted to climb, climb, climb. But it wasn't a tendency to nose up into a stall. It was a perfectly normal climb. And that with the airspeed at forty miles an hour!

Dyn made a few easy turns, his narrowed eyes glancing from one side to the other at the wings. He stalled it mildly to get an idea of its landing speed. Then he swung back over the field and eased her down to a pretty three-pointer.

HOSS waited for him in front of the hangar. In his excitement he was past the ability of speech. His lips moved as if he were talking and he seemed to think he was talking. But Dyn couldn't hear a word.

"I'm just goin' to give her wings a final check," Dyn said, throttling the engine so that it barely idled. He slapped Hoss a good thump on the shoulders to wake him up. "It flies all right, Hoss," he reassured the inventor. "Now take it easy! Relax, before something busts inside you."

"D . . . D . . . Dyn," Hoss stuttered, "the d . . . damned telephone's been ringin' and ringin'!"

Dyn thought about Ruby Rouge and the six hundred thousand dollars he had won. But it would be a queer kind of bookie who called up to tell a man he's won over a half million bucks. Sao Lee's cousin might call him, except that he wouldn't know where to call.

And then Dyn thought about the man he'd run over last night. And he thought about the mayor who'd been killed in an automobile accident, so that the whole city was up in arms. Dyn knew how people were about accidents like that. One time he'd seen a drunk stagger out in front of a car and get run over. The street crowd wanted to kill the poor driver, who wasn't to blame in the least.

Hoss said: "I took a pinch bar and jerked the damned thing off the wall."

There was a screwy inventor for you! If he could stop the phone from ringing, everything would be all right.

"There's nothing to keep them from driving out here, Hoss," Dyn pointed out. "But it might not have been them at all. Anyway, I'm about set for the final test. And Hoss, listen: if they take me, that's not goin' to make any difference. I'll give you this ticket an' I'll give you a note to Sao Lee's cousin. You'll have plenty of money to build your ship, and some left over to hire a mouthpiece for me. That's a lot better than me runnin' off to Mexico."

"Uh-huh. All right, Dyn. Whatever you say. Dyn, I made you a pot of hot coffee. I'll bring it. You need some hot coffee, Dyn."

Dyn turned to *Keefe's Luck*. His long, tough fingers brushed lightly over the drum-tight fabric of the wings, searching for places where the fabric might have slackened because of failure or change of the internal structure. He had almost finished when Hoss came from the hangar, running, clutching a smoke-blackened coffee pot to his chest.

"They're comin'! Dyn, they're comin'! The police car."

The warning was confirmed by a short, sharp yelp from a prowler siren.

THE car swung into view around the hangar. It stopped abruptly, humping up onto itself with its arrested momentum. The man sitting in the back, his head swathed

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in white bandages, got out first. The cop beside the driver opened the door. His handcuffs rattled to the ground and he stooped to pick them up. Dyn saw a Tommy submachine gun holstered in the car, within easy reach of the driver.

Dynamite's mind, for a moment, was like dry sawdust milling furiously in the circular twist of a whirlpool. Then it stopped and the thoughts arranged themselves in a neat pattern.

He knew first that he had to finish with this test. He knew second that the submachine gun could drop him at his first move to get into the plane. They would think he was trying to escape and they wouldn't hesitate. Forty-five slugs, sprayed like water from a garden hose, can make a sickening mess of things.

But he knew that a jury in this city would believe the other man. He was injured and his car had been completely demolished. Dyn, with his queer sort of luck, hadn't been scratched and neither had his car. That was what would count in the eyes of the jury. The evidence of wheel marks was a cold, unemotional thing that couldn't touch their sympathies.

Living on the ragged edges of life for so many years had taught Dynamite to think while he was moving and doing things. That was what was important—action.

The injured man was in the lead, a few paces in front of the cops. Dyn leaped toward him, his hand extended:

"Why, what d'you know!" he shouted joyfully, grabbing the other's hand, pumping it with vigor. "Say, pal, I'm sure glad to see you!"

The man stopped. His mouth sagged with astonishment. For a critical space of time, because of this amazement, he was putty in the hands of Dynamite Keefe.

"Say, you're just in time, boy!" Dyn shouted and jerked the man close, still pretending to shake his hand. In a low voice, for the other's ears alone: "You make one squawk an' I'll bust your jaw!"

The cops stopped dead in their tracks. "Hey!" one of them exclaimed, "why didn't you tell us you knew him?"

By this time Dynamite had the injured man beside the airplane, was helping him in with great ceremony, still holding his hand in a tight, hard grip.

He slammed the door, shoved the man into the front, right-hand seat where he could easily see him and reach him from the pilot's seat.

"Look here!" the man protested. "Are you crazy! I don't want to ride in this thing. Where's this man they call Dynamite Keefe?"

"Ah, but you're goin' to ride in it, friend. An' you're goin' to love it," Dyn promised, fastening the safety belt around him as tightly as possible.

"I'm no greenhorn joy-hopper," the man sputtered. "I've flown thousands of miles in these things!"

Dyn squatted in the pilot's seat. He pointed to the fire extinguisher, clipped to the floor beside the seat. "I could sure give you an awful sock with that," he said, fastening his own belt.

A long-drawn shout of rage and fear was drowned out by the thundering radial. Dyn shot the stick forward, lifting the tail-wheel.

They took off cross-field, cross-wind, and this time he didn't try to keep the *Luck* from climbing.

V

THE engine grumbled savagely at its task and the airspeed held at a quivering thirty-five. Dyn expected it to stall off onto a wing any moment. And he didn't have the slightest idea what she'd do in a spin.

The guy was sitting quietly behind him, a frown of bewilderment on his face. Occasionally he turned to look at the receding earth. He didn't seem frightened. He had boasted of having flown thousands of miles. Well, that was just fine! He'd have sense enough then to know how dangerous it was to monkey with the man at the controls.

Dyn's ears were popping from altitude. It was like hanging a pursuit job on its propeller. Only it was different. The *Luck* seemed to be rolling up a steep, steep hill. That was it. There was the feeling of being in a glider, shoved up by convection currents. It was the damndest thing Dynamite had ever experienced in his thousands of hours of flying.

At eight thousand he leveled off. He didn't waste any time. There wasn't any time to spare.

He stalled it. The airspeed sank down, *down*. At twenty-eight miles per hour she was humping herself, ready to spin. Twenty-eight miles an hour! And her top speed was well over two hundred miles per. There was speed range for you.

He rocked the joystick full width of the cockpit and she answered promptly, banking from side to side. Control! Wonderful!

The man behind him said: "Is that airspeed calibrated?"

Dynamite didn't answer him. It was an old airspeed, but it wouldn't be off more than a few miles.

He dipped the nose, gave her the gun. Instantly the speed build up, as it always does with a well streamlined job. At two hundred and a quarter he snapped her into a double barrel roll, watching the wings to see if there would be any wrinkles form in the coverings.

Not a sign of them! She'd take anything. Well, almost anything. He wouldn't try a dive to terminal velocity.

Dyn stalled her again, then booted her into a tailspin, his left foot jammed hard against the rudder, stick clear back.

Four turns to the left and he reversed rudder. The *Luck* grunted with her hurt feelings, but she took it.

Four turns to the right. He neutralized controls, watched the hangar swim in a dizzy circle below him. A little more than one turn and she straightened herself. Not good, not bad. Just a little better than average in recovery from a spin. But a weight-lifting plane isn't spun as a general practice.

Dyn leveled off. The man behind him shouted, "Man, you've got a ship here!"

Dyn turned around, grinning with pleasure, forgetting for a moment that this guy was out here to put him in the jailhouse.

The guy had stuck an unlighted cigar in his mouth and was chewing it. He was fairly eating it in his excitement.

Dyn hadn't gotten a good look at him the night before. There wasn't any light to speak of and his face was covered with blood. But he seemed much older than Dyn had remembered him.

The guy asked, "Just what in the devil have you got in mind?"

DYN had to think about that for a second or two. Things had been happening so fast, and he'd been so intent with his flying. "Well," he said, "my first idea was that I had to get this ship tested. But now that you're up here, friend, I'm gettin' myself another idea."

The man's face hardened. But he waited, not saying anything.

"What I've got in mind," Dyn said, "is that you're goin' to sign a statement, saying that last night you ran me off the road and damned near killed me."

"I . . . I'll see you in hell first!"

Dyn said quietly, "well, now pal, maybe that's just exactly what you will do."

"Confound you, you can't threaten me like this! You're not scaring *me!*"

But it was easy enough to see that he was frightened.

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"And in that statement," Dyn continued, "you're going to admit that you were traveling sixty or seventy miles an hour. If that side road hadn't come into the highway at an angle, you'd have rolled her when you turned. The cops saw that from your skid marks. And," Dyn finished, "you're goin' to admit that your lights were doused."

"I'm going to—say, who in thunderation do you think I am?"

A knife-edge of doubt thrust itself into Dyn's thoughts. He looked at the bandaged head. The hair at the sideburns was peppered with gray. That other guy's hair had been jet black, and greasy with pomade. Dyn had smelled the sickening odor of it about the wrecked car. Yes, and come to think of it, the cops had mentioned that the guy's arm had been broken.

Suddenly the man behind him started to laugh. He fairly doubled up with his mirth. "You're Dynamite Keefe," he choked between great shouts of merriment.

"Well," Dyn said grumpily, trying to hold onto a few shreds of his dignity. "So I made a mistake . . . so you get a swell stunt ride for nothing. Can't we just forget that this ever happened, mister?"

The guy was still enjoying his belly laughs. "I don't think so, Dynamite. No, it's altogether too good. I'm just beginning to see it, and it gets better all along."

He pointed at Dyn, trying to hold in his chuckles so he could talk. "You . . . you thought I was the kidnaper that you ran over last night."

"What!"

The guy pounded his chest. "I'm Elton Dewey. I'm the man whose son was kidnaped. Don't you get it?"

DYN shook his head slowly. "No," he admitted. "Nope, I'm in a tailspin. I'm in a fog and my gyro instruments have gone haywire."

"But you told the sergeant to check that man's license plates! You told him to get fingerprints!"

Dyn said stupidly: "Well, he had his lights doused. I—"

"Sure. He left my boy tied up and gagged. Under a pile of brush, where he wouldn't have been found for months. And he collected the ransom money and circled around to the other side of the valley and hid out for a couple of days. Last night he was making his getaway and something must have frightened him."

Dyn understood then. "Why, you're the furniture man who got shot by the deputy!"

"Just an accident. We got separated one night when we were out searching and there was a light valley fog." Dewey motioned to his bandaged head. "Nothing serious at all."

Dyn sucked in a deep breath. "Well," he said relievedly, "I might have known it. That's the kind of luck I have, Mr. Dewey." He cut the gun and slanted down for a landing.

Dewey frowned. "I don't see anything wrong with that kind of luck. I came out here to offer some—"

"Whoa, there!" The big fellow was getting riled. "I'm not taking a reward or anything of the kind, Mr. Dewey. I'm just tickled pink that I ran over that kidnapin' snake. But it was just an accident—my kind of accident, that brings luck to other people. D'yuh see?"

Mr. Dewey nodded, but he didn't look altogether convinced.

They landed and Dyn taxied over near the police car and cut his switches. Mr. Dewey got out first and stood back a little ways, admiring *Keefe's Luck*. You understood by the look in his eyes that he knew a good plane when he saw it.

Dyn left him talking with Hoss and walked over to the two cops. They were the same ones who had arrested him last night. He said, "Say, do you guys work all the time?"

The cop who drove said, "No, big boy. We ain't on duty. Mr. Dewey had a flat tire so the chief asked us to drive him out here."

"I don't suppose you guys ever drink," Dyn said. "Which is too bad because I got a full quart of *Old Kentucky Beesting* inside the shack."

They followed him into the shack and Dyn poured a stiff drink around.

"Here's mud in your eye," one of the cops said. They were both looking around the dirty hole of a place and looking at Dyn's clothes and trying to figure out what it was all about.

The other cop smacked his lips over the Bourbon. "Whiskey like this calls for a better toast than that old wheeze about mud in your eye," he said.

Dyn had tilted the bottle that they hadn't quite emptied the night before. He liked to hear the contented gurgle in the bottle as the hundred-proof slid smoothly down his throat. He said, lowering the bottle, "Good liquor doesn't need any kind of a toast. It just needs to be drunk."

"That's a sweet car you own," the driver of the prowl car said.

"An' that's a sweet piece of driving you did last night," the other cop added. "You musta drove race cars sometime in your life to figure out those bank angles that fast."

"Accidental," Dyn assured him. "I was scared silly."

The cop grinned, unconvinced.

The door crashed in and Hoss Breton stood on the threshold, his upper lip flapping. For the first time in his life he could talk when excited. "Mr. Dewey wants to loan me money for the four-engine job, Dyn," he shouted. "Mr. Dewey makes furniture. Every kind of furniture! He's got a factory a mile square, Dyn. It's chuck full of woodworking machinery—everything I need to build—"

"Well," Dyn said, bewildered at this unexpected turn of things, "well, that's fine, Hoss." It took a minute or so for the full implication of this to sink in. He poured himself a drink, his hand trembling. Something horrible had taken place!

His mind was filled with a dizzy kaleidoscope, dominated by the leering, greedy face of Lucus Krump; a background of himself buried under tons of shoddy uniforms; of himself laying cornerstones, kissing babies, wearing a dust-mop type of mustache and making speeches.

That six hundred thousand dollars, won by Ruby Rouge! He had promised his father; he had promised old man Krump. . .

Hoss was excitedly gathering up glasses and broken cups to pour them all a drink.

Dyn could see it now—the trend of Dynamite luck. If he hadn't run over that kidnaper, Dewey never would have known about the plane and had that test flight. His luck always helped other people. And now this six-hundred grand—that would help Krump, who didn't need any help. It was wrong; all wrong!

One of the cops raised his glass. "Here's to fast women and beautiful horses," he said.

"Here's to Ruby Rouge," Dyn agreed in a sick voice, staring into his drab future, feeling the yoke of slavery to Lucus Krump.

"Wasn't that a dirty shame!" the other cop said. "Leadin' the field on the homestretch by a good three lengths when he stumbled and broke his leg."

Dyn's glass hesitated a little in its upward tilt. But just for a split-second. What a perfectly wonderful world this was!

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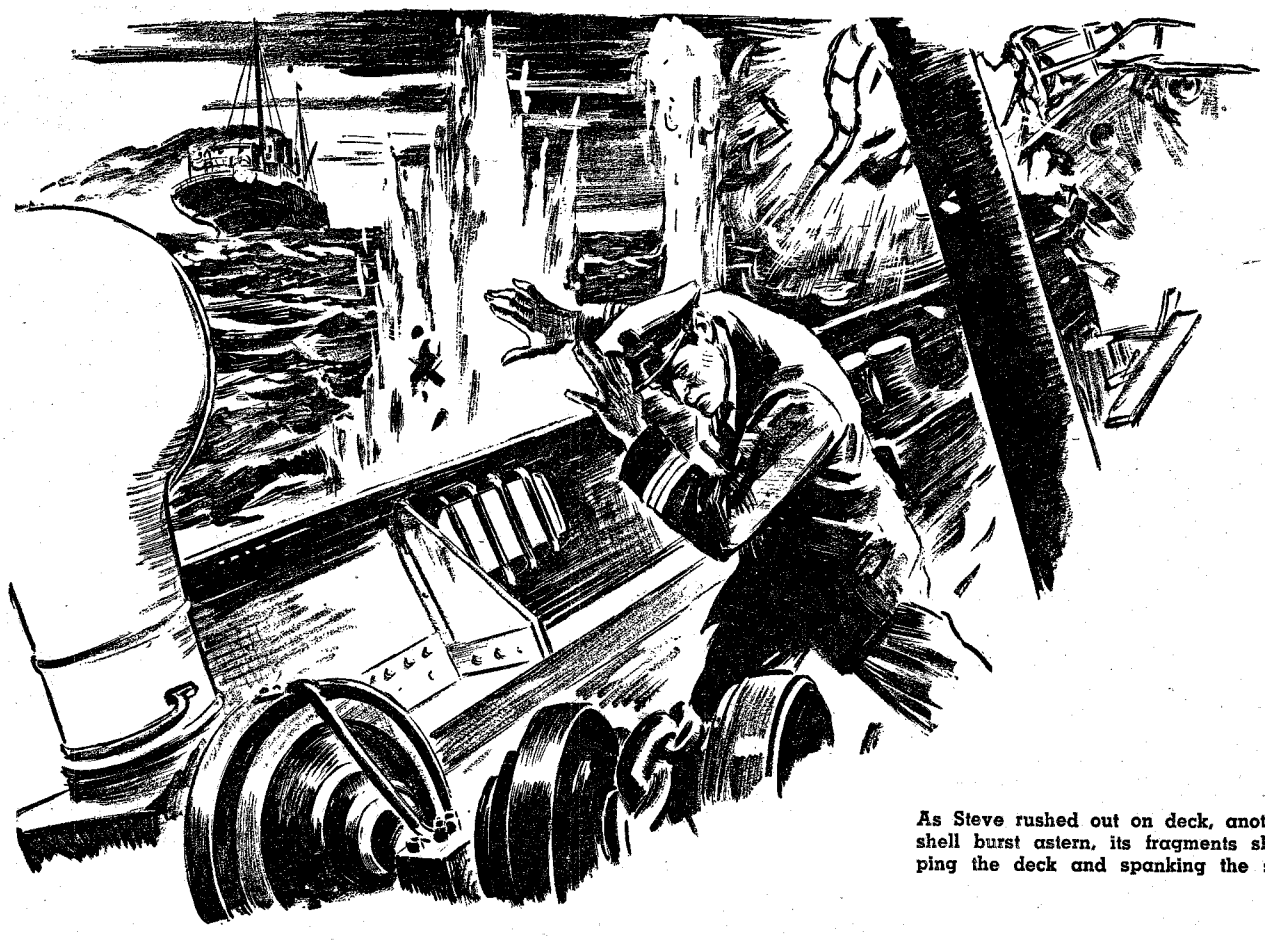

As Steve rushed out on deck, another shell burst astern, its fragments slapping the deck and spanking the sea

Defense of the Realm

By Richard Sale

Author of "Cape Spectre," "In Action," etc.

The real fighters in this man's war don't always hang out where the battle is thickest. But when the right time comes—well, it isn't wise to call a Britisher a coward

THE PACIFIC OCEAN simmered, because its flattened surface was flecked with raindrops. The rain was intense. There was no wind at all; there had been none for a long time.

The ocean barely stirred; its only movement was a faint heaving motion which was not perceptible to the eye—so slight an action that it barely rolled the lonesome freighter. She sloshed along at eight knots, her blunt bow pushing wearily against the solidness of sea.

Her name was *Lorraine Rock*. She was an old ship of eight thousand tons gross, her hull painted a dirty, flat mud-gray. Her top speed was twelve knots. The Union Jack flew from her masthead. An ugly and antique craft, which had sailed from Wellington sixty days before.

She sailed in a great circle, on the perimeter of which were such places as the New Hebrides, the Solomons, and New Caledonia. She moved steadily, despite the age of her machinery, and there were relatively few breakdowns. She was kept moving, pausing only for supplies.

This was as it should have been. She was not meant for trade. She was a solitary ship on a vast sea, and she was looking for trouble. Her destiny was written in one of these southwestern Pacific lanes. She was trying to find it, and it could not be found by compass and sextant. . . .

Lieutenant-Commander Stephen Stoneham was sitting in the captain's cabin, playing chess with the *Lorraine Rock's* master. It was Captain Fitzhugh's move; had been for five minutes. Captain Fitzhugh studied the board, running his hand through his short gray hair.

In the first World War, where he had commanded the destroyer *Delhi* in the action at Jutland, he had earned the nickname Firepants. He had had his clothes set afire while saving a crew member from burning to death on the bridge after a direct hit.

Steve was thinking that everybody had forgotten the nickname Firepants. That had been a long time ago. He himself would never have heard of it if his own father, Sir Ezra Stoneham of the Admiralty, had not told him the story. He waited for Captain Fitzhugh to move, and he regretted that the captain was going to lose the game.

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He doesn't like me, Steve thought. He doesn't like me at all.

There was no way of throwing the game either. He wished now he had not played so well. Old Firepants did not like him, and would like him less for winning the game. Not that Firepants was a sore loser. He just did not like to play with Steve Stoneham.

"Oh well," said Captain Fitzhugh presently, his voice polite. "I'm afraid you've got me, Stoneham. I resign."

"You seem to have something on your mind," Steve said. "Otherwise, you'd have trimmed me easily."

Captain Fitzhugh met his eyes steadily, "Not at all. You won it fairly. I played my best. At least your chess is excellent."

Steve frowned. He put the chessmen back into the box, aware that his face was flushed. Captain Fitzhugh stared at him a moment, then turned away and lighted his pipe, grimly. Finally he grunted, "Blasted rain!"

Steve said, "We've had more than our share of it at that. At any other time, I mean, if this were just an ordinary cargo ship bound for Melbourne, we'd welcome the cover of the rain we've had this last week. Unfortunately, we don't want cover. Very difficult for the enemy to sight us while we're in it."

Captain Fitzhugh replied, "My dear Stoneham, there is no green in my eye, and I know as well as you that the chance of an enemy raider sighting us is quite small, even without rain. As a matter of fact, the whole idea has left me completely unsympathetic and I shall inform the Admiralty so when we return to Portsmouth. If we ever return to Portsmouth.

"Of course, I haven't as much influence as you have with the Admiralty. I suppose you, with your father, could keep us running around the Pacific for quite some years—until the war ended perhaps, and home waters were more trustworthy for a man to sail upon."

"Look here," Steve said suddenly, then stopped.

"Yes?" Fitzhugh said sharply.

"Nothing," said Steve. "Forget it. If you'll excuse me, sir, I'll be getting along."

CAPTAIN FITZHUGH rose. He was not as tall as Steve nor as broad. He looked older than his fifty-seven years. He said quietly, "You don't have to say sir to me." He chewed on his pipe stem. "You're in command of this show; I am only in command of the ship. You're my superior officer."

Steve said, surprised, "Is that why you resent me? I can't believe that. You're too much navy to dislike me because I outrank you. After all, Captain, you'd retired from the service, and they only called you back because they needed war-taught men on the freighters of the Atlantic convoys.

"You couldn't expect to be given a command over the heads of younger men who were on active duty all along when this thing broke."

"I quite understand that," said Captain Fitzhugh, "and while there is a natural inclination, sometimes, to resent it when one of the young squirts on an escorting destroyer raises hell with you for getting your ship out of line, still, one can understand that. . . . To be perfectly frank, Stoneham, I wish I were back in the Atlantic convoy."

Steve said nothing. He was breathing hard and wishing that this weren't happening because he liked the old fire-eater.

"Why, Captain?"

"Well," replied Fitzhugh carefully, "to be tactful, let's just say that inaction isn't at all good for my liver. That's why I'd rather be back with the Atlantic convoys, old man. Because I'm damned tired of goldbricking away the war down here. Most of my men are."

Steve said sharply, "At least you concede there *is* a Jerry raider? I'll promise you more than enough action if we should ever flush the enemy."

"No doubt," said Fitzhugh, staring out his window absently. "No doubt."

Steve felt mildly annoyed. "What would you recommend then, Captain Fitzhugh?"

Fitzhugh turned slowly. "I'd recommend, Stoneham, that you advise the Admiralty that we are fishing with barbless hooks down here for a Loch Ness monster that people have heard of and never seen. I've got two three-inch guns. Not worth a damn. What I mean is, this whole venture seems to have been your original idea.

"A motor torpedo boat hidden aboard an apparently harmless freighter. Q-boat 1941. I never did think it was worth a tuppence. I'm almost convinced now that it was never meant to be worth a tuppence."

Steve said evenly, "What does that mean?"

"I refuse to amplify the remark," replied Fitzhugh. "I only suggest that you advise the Admiralty that we might be of better use in more hostile waters. At least we could use this bottom to ship food into the Isles."

"I have no intention of doing anything of the kind," said Steve. "You talk as if we had all come down here for a good rest to quiet our nerves and that it's time now to get back to the war. I came down here to find a raider and destroy her, and I intend to stay here until the mission is accomplished, or until the Admiralty decrees otherwise."

"Of course," said Captain Fitzhugh. The gray-haired man looked patient, but openly distant. "If you say so, Stoneham."

Steve opened the door and went out. He knew that he would not be back again. Fitzhugh had made that plain enough. There was to be no more chess in the master's cabin.

AT NOON, when he came out of his own cabin for mess, Steve heard his name spoken and paused. There were two men on the deck beneath him, out of sight. He was glad, later, that he could not see them. He examined the sea, through the rain, shielding his eyes behind his binoculars.

". . . and 'im and Stoneham they 'ad quite a set-to about it. But Fitzie lost the battle and we'll be stayin' on 'ere till Gawd knows when, me lad."

"How'd you hear all this, Tom?"

"I was under th' bloomin' window what was open a crack," Tom said. "I couldn't 'elp 'earin' 'em."

"Ah," said the other, "I don't believe it, not half! He's a nice young chap, is Stoneham."

"'E might be," said Tom, "but that don't change it none, me lad. It's the truth. Young Stoneham, 'e was in an action with an E-boat off Calais and 'is nerves busted all to bloomin' 'ell, so he fixes it with 'is old man for an expedition down 'ere lookin' for a sea raider so's 'e can take it easy and get 'is nerve back."

"Are you saying he's a coward?"

"I ain't sayin' nothin' but what I 'eard Fitzie and the

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first officer discussin' one night recently, that Lieutenant Stoneham don't 'ave no stomach for action and got up this expedition so's to get away from 'ostile waters in the Channel.

"After all, me lad, what kind o' 'unting is it, when ye've got but a pair o' three-inchers and a motor boat? Not even a machine gun on the bridge, and we're lookin' for a raider, so 'e says. You don't 'unt a blasted raider with a motor boat and three-inchers lad; not unless you don't expect to meet no Jerry ship at all . . ."

Steve stepped into his cabin silently. He felt a little sick. Next time he came out, a minute later, he made noise. He did not hear the two seamen talking again. Hearing him, they coughed embarrassedly and moved on their way.

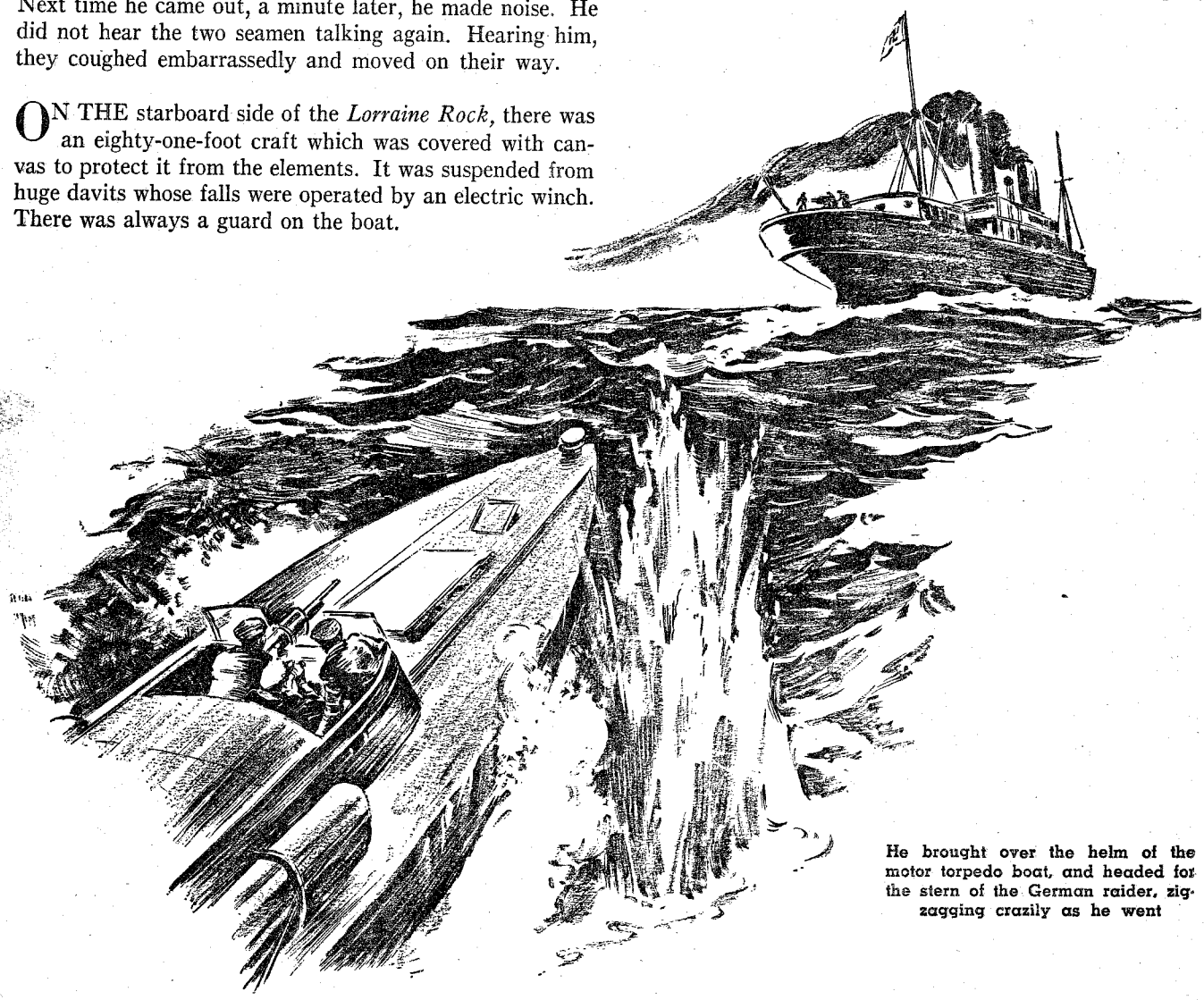
ON THE starboard side of the *Lorraine Rock,* there was an eighty-one-foot craft which was covered with canvas to protect it from the elements. It was suspended from huge davits whose falls were operated by an electric winch. There was always a guard on the boat.

Brooks made no reply, of course. It had been a little unfair of Steve to say that. Brooks could not reply.

Steve liked Brooks. Brooks was young and good looking and the petty officer of the MT 129. Steve said, "Keep a weather eye on her, Brooks. We may need her in a hurry one of these days."

"Yes sir." But Brooks sounded dubious.

ONCE a day, they practiced the routine. At four in the afternoon, usually, the alarm would be sounded. "Enemy sighted, bearing zero nine zero!" Whereupon,



He brought over the helm of the motor torpedo boat, and headed for the stern of the German raider, zig-zagging crazily as he went

The canvas hid her from sight and made her outline look harmless enough. But she was hardly that. There were three Rolls Royce engines in her power compartment astern. On her deck, forward, there were two twenty-one-inch Mark IV torpedoes in their tubes. At her small streamlined bridge there were four fifty-caliber machine guns which could be fired from any angle.

Steve walked through the rain to her and spoke to the guard. "Hello, Brooks," he said. He looked taut and pale. "How is the she?"

"All right, sir," Brooks said. "It looks as if we'll never get a chance to use her. This rain gives us too much cover."

"Are you in a hurry?" Steve said.

"I suppose I am, sir, though why I don't know. It'll be the closest thing to committing suicide, I've ever tried. But what the devil, sir, it's all in fun, eh?"

Steve said grimly. "Captain Fitzhugh doesn't think so."

the freighter would swing across the bearing presenting her port beam to the enemy to hide the starboard from sight.

Then the two three-inch guns would open fire. At the same time a deck crew would work the winch and the davits, and the crew of the motor torpedo boat would climb up into her while other hands ripped off her canvas cover. The winch would grind as the davits swung out. Down into the sea would go MT 129.

Long practice had given them a fifteen-minute proficiency. Fifteen minutes from *alarm* to *finish launching.* It could have been less but the engines in the motor boat had to be warmed on deck, gears not engaged.

Then she was swiftly on her way, laying smoke first across the port side of the freighter to hide her, and then zig-zagging crazily out on the zero nine zero bearing. Sometimes the sea was too rough for launching at all.

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Steve lolled on the bridge, staring out through the spinning storm windows now and then, trying to pierce the rain. It was thick and gray. He used binoculars but they brought nothing to his eyes. The same lonely sea, rain-flecked, hulking. They crept through it at their snail's pace as rust creeps across the face of iron.

Steve had a distinct impression that most of the freighter crew had heard Fitzhugh's tales about him. The grapevine aboard ship had done its work. It was quite apparent. He was the commanding officer, but the men resented it. They regarded him with queer knowing smiles. There was no humor in their smiles, only faint contempt.

Damn them, he thought, and damn Fitzhugh. Times have changed since that old fire-eater commanded his destroyer.

As for the E-boat actions off Calais, of course he had been afraid at the time. You are always afraid before an action starts. When you can think, you can be afraid, it is only when time for thinking has stopped that men grow brave. Yes, he had been afraid, but not cowardly. He had fought until the enemy retired.

Steve felt confused and annoyed and strangely depressed. It was all nonsense, of course, and yet he did value the old boy's opinion. It was a nasty sort of thing to have believed about you.

He realized that he was going to owe the enemy a debt, for without the enemy, he would remain in the shadow of Captain Fitzhugh's contempt. The prospect was not pleasant. He appreciated that silent friendly esteem of one's fellow men. Appreciated it becase he knew he did not have it.

So he watched from the bridge, feeling as lonely as the ship. Two months of it. Rain and empty space. Cloudy days, more rain, and always the vast seat which stretched out before them, unbroken by any ship or trail of smoke against the sky. But the vigil went on.

AT THREE o'clock it had stopped raining. The day was brighter. Steve Stoneham was finishing a letter to his father when the alarm sounded. He put down the pen and paper and slipped into his slicker.

He did not hurry because he was as tired of this routine alarm and drill as the rest of the ship was. They were all getting stale. He knew he was going to have to warn them about it, warn them to step smartly; and yet his own heart wasn't in it greatly.

He found his cap and put it on and then he heard a descending whistle. The whole ship shook. There was a sharp and penetrating explosion. A picture fell off the wall. The ship rolled to port and hung there.

The alarm kept going. The freighter finally rolled back. There was a stink of fire and high explosive in the air.

He rushed out on deck, at once astonished at the increased visibility. The mists had vanished. He made his way to his station and as he went he heard the screech of another shell. It burst astern, sending up a white waterspout. Flying fragments slapped the ship and spanked the sea, raising little spouts all around.

There were three wounded men at the MTB station, and a scene of rent steel and pocked superstructure. A shell in the first salvo had scored a direct hit amidships high, close to the stack. The motor torpedo boat had a jagged hole in her afterdeck, but she was still seaworthy.

The *Lorraine Rock* was turning, Captain Fitzhugh on the bridge. Across the sea, placid and oily as the sun broke through Steve saw the German, a big gray ship with the swastika flying from her main-mast; the armed merchantman which had been preying on the south Pacific shipping.

She was big and she looked fast. And she mounted heavier guns. She had four of them—you could see it in the accurately placed straddling salvos—and they were 4.7s.

Fitzhugh did not give Steve cover. Instead Fitzhugh turned his bow at the German as the forward gun crew collapsed the camouflaged little deckhouse from around the three-inch gun up there. He was outranged and he was going to try and close the range so that he could put his guns into action. But in doing so his rear gun could not be brought to bear at all.

The forward three-incher opened fire. The shell was far short. Up eight hundred. They fired again. Short. The freighter nosed slowly and anxiously forward. A ragged salvo from the German screamed at them. Three bursts in the sea. Stuff moaned through the air all around. One shell burst just abaft the bow on deck. The fragments took out every window on the bridge.

But Fitzhugh was still there, unharmed. He was peering at the German through binoculars. The forward gun crew was sadly depleted. Others went forward to help man it, but four men were dead up there.

Steve tightened his jaw as he climbed up into the motor torpedo boat. He ordered his engines on and started warming them, damning them for their slowness.

ANOTHER salvo. This time the four shells were long. The freighter had moved inside them. But the German had the range well enough. It would be down fifty and four shells coming aboard.

"Break your course!" Steve yelled at the bridge.

Fitzhugh never heard him, of course, and yet it occurred to him too. He took the freighter off her track, presenting the port beam and giving the starboard protection for the launching of the motor torpedo boat.

Steve couldn't help admiring the gunnery of the raider. It was good. A straddle with the first salvo, and on the range with all the others. The gunners would pick them up on the next firing, no doubt of it. But the maneuver they had practiced for so long was finally under way.

The Rolls engines were turning over as the seaman swung the boat out on the davits, her crew aboard. The winch whinnied and they went down. There was another whinnying sound as they touched the water. The falls released themselves—patent gear—and simultaneously there was a tremendous explosion.

Steve, on the bridge of the MT 129, saw the blossoms of smoke which shot skyward on the other beam of the freighter. The sound was so terrific, he knew that more than one shell had struck.

"Brooks," he said, "we've got to get out of here."

"They're not warm enough, sir."

"Can't help that. The Jerry will blow the bottom out of Fitzhugh's boat in a few minutes. Battle stations. Prepare to make smoke." He spoke into the phone to his engineer, Whitson, who crouched astern in the compartment which was choked with the motive power. "We've got to step, Whitson. Do your best by them."

Whitson said, "Aye, aye, sir."

Steve palmed the throttles forward. MT 129 leaped away from her cover on the starboard beam of the *Lorraine*

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Rock. Her hard-chine bow rose up as she began to plane on her step. Steve put her helm hard over and banked her around. He headed southwest, increasing his speed as he went.

The engines took it, roaring terrifically. The stern of the lumbering shell-torn freighter flashed by. Steve put the helm over again and banked around the stern of the freighter to her port side.

"Lay smoke," he ordered.

THE black smoke instantly poured out of the two nozzles astern. Steve put the motor torpedo boat on the same course as the freighter but fifty yards off her port. The freighter ceased firing.

By the time he had overtaken her bow, MT 129 reached her peak speed, a little over fifty knots. Behind her she threw a spume of suds, arcing it skyward from her triple screws. The spume was lost in the black smoke screen.

Steve, past the freighter's bow, held the course for quarter of a mile; until, far ahead, a shell exploded in the sea. They had seen him.

Then he brought the helm over, watching the tachometers, to squeeze out every revolution from the engines; and he headed for the German raider, which was turning north, presenting its stern to MT 129. He zigzaged crazily as he went, still laying smoke.

"Man machine guns," he ordered. "When the range closes, wipe off that stern gun crew."

MT 129 had a top speed, all out, of fifty-two knots. Measured in land miles, not "Admiralty" miles, this was akin to sixty-three miles an hour.

He changed his course with lightning rapidity, dancing the boat capriciously on her screws as she whipped to port then dead ahead, then starboard, then dead ahead. It was the very devil standing erect.

Steve knew what the Jerry gunners were going through. They had to find a mark that changed drastically every second. This being so, they had trouble. The stern gun opened up and began lobbing shells overhead.

Then the gunners got smarter. As the range closed and they stopped trying to bring the heavy gun to bear on the boat, they picked a mark astern between themselves and MT 129, and began laying down a wall of steel across it, knowing the motor torpedo boat would have to make a collision course astern to score a hit with a torpedo.

Meanwhile, up in the German's superstructure, the smaller and more mobile anti-aircraft gun astern was brought to bear down.

The A. A. gun anticipated Steve. He swung to port once and ran into a burst in the sea which studded the bow with splinters. Almost instantly, a second shell struck the sheer forward and burst. Beside him, Brooks fell to the floor, grasping at his chest. The windshield was smashed on the port side. Steve brought her hard to starboard. Three more explosions broke the sea.

The range closed sharply. Steve muttered, "Just give me thirty seconds!"

HE DREW upon his collision course, aiming the bow of MT 129 directly into the center of the raider's stern. The gray ship was growing larger quickly. He saw the 4.7 inch gun astern flash.

He fired his first torpedo off the port tube, and instantly retarded the throttles, so that he would not overrun his warhead which had a speed of only thirty-six miles an hour.

The raider saw the white course of the torpedo. The ship turned off to evade it, to starboard. Steve lined his bow on hers at the start of her turn. He fired number two from the starboard tube, then turned off. Clear of the warhead he began to run back for the cover of his own smoke. He heard his machine guns open up on the stern gun. He watched astern and waited.

The first torpedo never struck. The raider turned away in time. As her starboard beam came around, the other three guns opened fire on MT 129. They richocheted short, but a second salvo was got off at once, and Steve knew from the sound of them that he had trouble.

He was right. They exploded with terrific force as he wheeled off the course hard, the ship banking inward. But even this didn't help. One of the shells struck directly abaft the stern, and the motor torpedo boat shuddered violently. Steve saw his deck splinter upwards as the concussion knocked him headlong.

When he sat up his arm was bleeding; it didn't hurt. The engines were dead, MT 129 was sloshing, losing weigh.

Then, far off, he heard the rumble of thunder. A tower of sea rose up from the beam of the German raider, as high as the bridge. There was a brilliant flash, a volcano of smoke. The raider canted to starboard at a sharp angle and hung there.

She did not recover. There were no more salvos from her guns; they could not be brought to bear because of her list. She had turned broadside to the second torpedo.

It did not take her long to founder.

Nor MT 129 either. For her stern was shot away, and her engines were wrecked, and her engineer dead. Her machine gunners were dead too. By the time the *Lorraine Rock* had come through the smoke wall to pick up her survivors, the motor torpedo boat was squatting in the sea, sinking stern first.

THE *Lorraine Rock* heaved to twenty yards away from the spot where the motor torpedo boat foundered. Steve Stoneham and a torpedo man, the only survivors of the crew of six, were floating in their lifebelts. A boat was dispatched from the freighter and picked them up.

They were in pretty good shape. Steve had a bruise on his head where he had cut himself, and his arm had begun to ache badly. The rating's cheek wound, though ugly, was superficial. They were rowed to the ladder up which they slowly clambered. Steve went last.

When he reached the deck, he found the crew of the freighter drawn up at attention. They looked pathetic, their heels together, heads held high, making an alley for him to pass through. The boatswain was blowing on the pipe. Their faces were black and dirty and bloody.

They were piping him aboard.

Captain Fitzhugh, with an adhesive patch over one ear, came forward and saluted and then shook hands. He said quietly, "It was well done, sir."

"Thanks," Steve Stoneham replied. "We're all lucky, very lucky indeed. Let's be on our way for survivors."

"It was an excellent show," said Fitzhugh. His face was hard and his eyes were soft. This was his earnest apology, the only one he knew. "Damned well done, sir."

Steve held his hand firmly, shaking it, and smiling faintly. They would play chess again. They'd be playing chess all the way to Melbourne.

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Nogales' hand flashed up and Nance screamed and stumbled, clawing at his breast

Ramrod Ridge

By William Colt MacDonald

SOMEWHERE in that strange California desert thirty thousand dollars in gold lies hidden. Young FRED VINCENT had the task of transporting this treasure from one bank to another; and when his gold-train was held up by bandits, he alone managed to escape—with the gold. Then he vanished, to turn up at last on the desert, haggard, wounded and unconscious. But the treasure remains lost.

It is NOGALES SCOTT and CALIPER MAXWELL who take the unconscious Fred Vincent to the ranch owned by his father, ETHAN VINCENT. Guided by a Mexican named ESTEBAN (whom they call STEVE), the two men have come into the Ramrod Ridge country to investigate the mystery of the vanished gold. But young Vincent, though not seriously wounded, has lost his memory; he cannot name the hiding place of the gold, and Doc STEBBINGS is dubious about a quick recovery. Meanwhile, Nogales and Caliper are not the only ones interested in the vanished treasure.

ONE man's word is law in that lawless country—an enormous, shrewd, brutal man named SIMON CRAWFORD. He seeks the gold; he holds a mortgage on Ethan Vincent's ranch; and what is more, Crawford, aided by his pious-spoken henchman, DEACON TRUMBULL, has cooked up a scheme to make money out of Nogales Scott, who inherited a large fortune some years before.

The scheme is to forge a will and then shoot Nogales. The Deacon is skillful with a pen, but he must have a sample of Nogales' handwriting. Then Crawford sees the opportunity: Nogales Scott has determined to buy up the mortgage which Crawford holds on the Vincent ranch, and he suggests payment by check. But Crawford expresses so much pleasure over the check idea that Nogales senses trickery; he decides to ride into San Rivedino and bring back cash for payment. Enraged at this, Crawford orders the Deacon to take a bunch of men and ambush Nogales, Caliper and Steve when they return with the money. "See that they don't come back," Crawford growls.

NOGALES SCOTT has still another mission in San Rivedino. Because of the depredations of Crawford and his bandits, Ethan Vincent has asked the county authorities to send a lawman into Ramrod Ridge, but his request has been ignored. In San Rivedino Nogales bluffs SHERIFF BURGER so effectively that the sheriff swears him in as deputy and sends another deputy back with him. This is ROD PETERS, ex-Texas Ranger.

Nogales expects some sort of ambush from Crawford, and now pulls a neat piece of strategy. Riding ahead to Moonstone, Nogales finds Deacon Trumbull and his men waiting there in WACO BROWN'S saloon. Waco is an old friend of Nogales', and so he is willing to oblige when Scott asks him to use knockout drops on the bandits. The drops work beautifully: Nogales, Caliper and Steve ride on toward the Vincent ranch, leaving their ambushers insensible in Waco Brown's saloon. . . .

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CHAPTER XVI

COUNT YOUR MONEY, COUNT YOUR GUNS

IT WAS four in the afternoon by the time Nogales and his friends rode into Ramrod Ridge. They pulled rein before Simon Crawford's general store and dismounted. Several of Crawford's henchmen lounged on the store porch, and they scowled at the riders in silence.

Nogales spoke low-voiced to his companions. "Let me go in first, then you fellows bring in that sack of weapons. Caliper, let me have that money."

Caliper lifted the money sack from his saddle and handed it to Nogales. Nogales turned, mounted the steps to the store entrance and passed inside.

Simon Crawford stood behind the counter of the store section, eating crackers and peaches from a tin can. He was moving ponderously to reach to reach a can of sardines from a nearby shelf when he spied Nogales, just coming through the doorway. A scowl crossed his heavy face, to be quickly replaced by a look of amazement, as his small eyes spotted the sack in Nogales' hand.

Nogales said, "Howdy, Crawford. Got that note of Vincent's handy? I've got your money for you."

Crawford didn't reply for a moment. At length he grunted, "I got the note, but I ain't sure if I want to release it."

Nogales' face hardened. "Look, Crawford, we went all through that before. I can't force you to turn that note over to me, but I've talked to Vincent. I know he's more than willing to accept a loan and pay the money himself. So, one way or the other, you've got to give up that paper."

"All right, all right," Crawford rumbled. "You can have the note, providing you got the money. But I ain't counted your money yet."

"Maybe you didn't expect me to get here with it," Nogales said mildly.

Crawford's pig-eyes narrowed. "Any particular reason why you shouldn't?"

"You should know as well as I," Nogales said dryly.

"Scott," Crawford demanded heavily, "what you driving at?"

"I happened to notice," Nogales replied, "that the Deacon isn't around today, nor Furlow, nor Bristol. Matter of fact, when we passed through Moonstone, I heard that the Deacon had been seen there."

Crawford's face turned red with anger, but his eyes still held a puzzled look. "Damn it!" he thundered. "I don't know where the Deacon is and I don't care. If you've got the money for that note, hand it over. I ain't got time to stand here talking all day."

"Right," Nogales said and swung the money sack on the counter. "You'll find it all there. Count it yourself."

"I intend to," Crawford snarled. He seized the sack, jerked open the draw-string and poured a shower of gold, silver and bills on his counter. Nogales watched narrowly while the big man's ham-like hands pawed the money. Finally Crawford finished, replaced the money in its sack and put it below the counter.

Nogales said, "Right amount?"

"It's correct," Crawford said curtly.

"Hand over the note," Nogales snapped.

For just an instant, Crawford hesitated. Then he noticed that Nogales' right hand rested on the butt of his six-shooter.

"All right," Crawford growled. "You needn't be in such a hurry. Nobody's going to cheat you."

"I know that damn well." Nogales smiled.

For a split instant, the two men faced one another; then Crawford heaved into motion.

CRAWFORD produced a billfold, and from it he took Vincent's note. Nogales spread it open and read it, then refolded the paper and placed it in his pocket.

"And now," Nogales smiled coolly, "you can give up all hope of ever owning the Rancho de Paz."

"Don't be too sure of that, Scott. I'm not through with you—" Then Crawford stopped short; Caliper and Steve, followed by Rod Peters, were just entering the doorway. It was the deputy sheriff's badge on Peters' vest that caught Crawford's attention. The three men sauntered across to join Nogales.

Nogales said, "Crawford, let me make you acquainted with Rod Peters, our new deputy. The sheriff's office in San Rivedino has just appointed him to Ramrod Ridge."

Neither Peters nor Crawford offered to shake hands. Crawford stared steadily at Peters for a moment, then grunted, "Never no telling what fool moves these politicians will make. It's just like that windbag Burger to send a deputy down here. Hell, this town doesn't need the law."

"It's here, whether you think it's needed or not," Peters said coldly. "And the law is going to be enforced. I'll be opening an office in one of the buildings here. I understand there are several deserted shacks—"

"Take what you need," Crawford said. "I suppose you'll be erecting a jail building next."

"Maybe I won't bother taking prisoners," Peters said quietly. "Maybe I won't have to. It's going to depend a lot on the Ramrod Ridge inhabitants. So far, I don't like what I've seen of 'em. From now on, any man that hasn't visible means of support, gets out! Do you get what I mean, Crawford? This town has been a hideout for crooks long enough. So if you know of anybody that might be on the wrong side of the law, you'd better tell him to get. Because he's sure due to tangle with me, if he doesn't."

"Pretty tough, ain't you?" Crawford's voice shook with anger.

Peters said, "Yes, I am. And the longer I stay here, the tougher I'll get. Just pass that warning around."

Crawford was silent a moment and when he spoke again his voice had changed. "Sure, sure, Deputy Peters," he said easily. "No use you and me having any misunderstanding. I still don't think a law officer is needed here, but that's not my business. I want to see things run lawful. I make a small living with my store and bar and I certainly wouldn't want to see things go bad here. Just call on me if you need any help. And take any of the buildings in town that you need. You can count on me to cooperate."

Peters said dryly, "Thanks."

CALIPER could hold in no longer. "Say, Crawford, how's your stock of hardware holding out?"

"Hardware?" Crawford looked suspiciously at Caliper. "Well, I ain't had so much call lately for hardware. Depends on what you need. Just what do you mean by hardware?"

"I had guns in mind," Caliper said seriously.

"I got a right good stock of firearms," Crawford commenced.

Caliper interrupted, "Well, we had a hunch you'd have some customers right soon for six-shooters, so we brought you in a supply." He lifted the heavy burlap sack of guns and belts and tossed it on the counter.

By this time the others were grinning widely. Crawford looked from man to man. "Where'd you get 'em?" he demanded.

"Over in Moonstone!" Caliper answered.

Nogales seized the sack and upended it, tumbling out on the counter a miscellaneous assortment of hand-arms.

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belts and holsters. Crawford stared at the weapons as though hypnotized.

"You've seen 'em around here enough," Nogales grinned, "to spot 'em right off, if you were real observant."

"Never saw 'em before," Crawford growled.

"I figure that's open to argument," Nogales returned, "but just in case you really don't know, these guns belong to Deacon Trumbull and that gang that was with him in Moonstone."

"So that's it," Crawford shouted at Rod Peters. "Scott got you appointed so you could unarm my men. You're not going to get away—"

"*Your* men?" Nogales asked softly. "Thought you didn't have any men working for you."

By this time the attention of the men at the bar had been attracted. They had swung around and were watching intently the scene at the store counter.

Crawford was so angry that he was shaking. He turned on Rod Peters. "You, Peters," he demanded, "what right you got disarming those men?"

Peters said quietly, "My right of office, Crawford. Trumbull and his gang were set to steal that money—"

"Did they pull their guns on you?" Crawford demanded. "What excuse did you have—"

"Look, Crawford," Nogales cut in, "taking these guns was my idea. If we hadn't taken them, somebody else might have, while they were asleep—"

"Asleep! Asleep?" Crawford bellowed, his small eyes widening. "What do you mean? Where were they asleep? What are you talking about?"

Nogales grinned. "They must have had too much to drink or something, because they passed out in Waco Brown's bar. Waco, being kind-hearted, lugged them back to his bedroom. Besides he didn't went them sprawled around on the floor of his barroom. It might set a bad example for the customers."

"They were sure sleeping peaceful," Caliper said. "It was a real pleasure to hear all the different kinds of snores. When we saw 'em layin' there so harmless like, we figured we'd better bring their guns to you, before somebody stole 'em."

"Peaceful really ain't no name for it," Nogales said tenderly. "Just the sight of all those men resting there so quiet brought out all of Caliper's maternal instincts. He wanted to sing lullabys to 'em."

CRAWFORD swung around quickly on Rod Peters. "Maybe you can give me the straight of this. These damn idjits ain't got a sensible idea in their heads."

"I agree with that," Peters chuckled. "You already got the straight of it, as much as we can tell you. Your men were asleep and we took their guns. In their condition they might have hurt themselves when they woke up."

"There's something damn' funny about all this," Crawford rumbled.

"Uh-huh," Nogales grinned. "We thought so, too."

"All right, you've had your laugh," Crawford snapped. "Maybe when I get the right of this, you'll laugh on the other side of your face. Now if you haven't any more business here, you can get out!"

"You can't make him get out," Rod Peters interposed. "This is a public place of business, by your own statement. So long as Nogales isn't disturbing the peace, you can't make him—"

"We're disturbing the peace, all right," Nogales said. "Crawford's peace. Come on, fellers, let's ramble."

Nogales and his three companions strolled through the doorway, followed by Crawford's venomous stare. The instant they were outside, Crawford snarled savagely across the room to one of the men at the bar, "You, Catlett, fork your horse and get over to Moonstone. See if you can get the straight of this business. No, you fool, don't leave right away. Wait until that deputy and those cow-nurses are out of sight."

He moved across the room to the bar. "Put out the bottle, Tony," he growled at his bartender. "I'm needin' a drink bad."

CHAPTER XVII

THE LISTLESS HELLIONS

WHEN Nogales and his companions reached the Rancho de Paz, they found Ethan Vincent, Polly and Doc Stebbings seated on the gallery. Polly was handing the two men long cool glasses.

Nogales introduced Rod Peters. He noticed at the time that Rod held Polly's hand just a trifle longer than seemed necessary. She gave Peters a friendly smile as she said, "If you gentlemen will find chairs, I'll see what I can do about finding something to take the desert heat out of your throats."

They sat down while Polly vanished inside the house. Vincent said, "So the sheriff's office in San Rivedino finally got around to sending us a deputy. We're mighty glad to see you, Rod Peters."

"I'm mighty glad to be here," Peters said. "Though I reckon you can thank Nogales more than the sheriff's office." He told how Nogales had bluffed Burger, and the others were still laughing when Polly emerged with a tray on which were four frosted glasses which she passed around.

Nogales smacked his lips. "What's this?"

Doc Stebbings' eyes twinkled. "This is Polly's specialty. It's just a little something she fixes up with mint and Bourbon and sugar and water. It's guaranteed to brighten a man's outlook on life."

"Mint juleps!" Caliper exclaimed. "Ain't had one of these since I went east to Houston that time."

"I'm think I'm go farther than that for the *señorita's* dreenk," Steve said.

Vincent laughed. "My little mint patch comes right handy these hot days."

"But—" Rod Peters sounded amazed. "You've got ice in these drinks, Miss Polly. Ice!"

"I'll have to show you our ice-house," Vincent explained. "Every winter I have my Indians go up in the mountains and bring down enough ice to last through the warm months."

Peters shook his head. "You Californians sure enough know how to live," he drawled. "I'm liking this country better all the time."

Polly laughed. "You wouldn't go back on your native Texas, would you, Deputy Peters?"

"Never thought I would," Peters said warmly, "until just a few minutes ago. Now I'm not so sure."

His eyes were steady on Polly's as he spoke. The girl met his gaze a moment, then looked away. "One thing is certain," she said, "you're welcome here. You know, Ramrod Ridge does need a deputy."

Nogales asked how Fred Vincent was. Doc Stebbings replied that he seemed stronger, that his temperature was down. "His wounds appear to be healing already. They weren't serious, of course. It was mostly lack of blood that weakened him. But he doesn't seem to remember much of anything. He spoke Polly's name once, today when she came into his room, but that's about all we could get from him. However, another week of uninterrupted rest might make a big difference."

They talked of Fred for a few minutes; then Nogales produced the loan note he had secured from Crawford and passed it to Ethan Vincent. Vincent looked at the note and

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swallowed hard, then passed it to Polly. For a moment neither of them spoke.

When she handed it back to Nogales, to their surprise he tore the note to bits, saying: "I'll feel better now that that doesn't exist."

Vincent said, "I'm intending to write you another note, right off, Nogales. I don't know how we're going to thank you."

"Forget it, please." Nogales smiled uncomfortably. To cover Vincent's confusion, he began to describe their trip to San Rivedino.

"ONE of Ethan's men was in Ramrod Ridge when you left the town," Doc Stebbings remarked. "He said you looked like you were headed San Rivedino way. We were sort of worried about you bringing cash all the way from there."

"No need to be worried," Nogales grinned. He told of relieving the Crawford men of their hardware. By the time he had finished the long gallery echoed with laughter.

"Knockout drops, eh?" Doc Stebbings chuckled. "I know just the drugstore in San Rivedino you bought those drops, I'll bet. Feller named Mauchwitz runs it, doesn't he?"

"That's the name," Nogales nodded. "Kind of a poisonous looking place. I figured I could get what I wanted there."

"You figured correct, all right," Stebbings said. "Mauchwitz does a lot of shady business. Sells liquor without a license and so on, liquor that he makes himself, out of raw alcohol, brown sugar and red pepper. It's terrible stuff."

Vincent looked serious. "I reckon you've made some dangerous enemies, Nogales. It's always risky business to laugh at men like that."

"I'm not worrying," Nogales replied. "They were enemies before, and there's nothing like laughter for cutting down a tough hombre's prestige. Some of those would-be hard fellers in Ramrod Ridge will realize that the Deacon and his men aren't so tough as they make out."

Vincent shook his head. "I'm afraid it won't end there. If something serious doesn't come of this, I'll be surprised. Men like Deacon Trumbull don't accept a thing like that without fighting back."

"The sooner they start fighting back, the better we'll like it," Caliper put in.

A short time later Polly said it was time to go into supper, and the men put down their glasses and rose. Vincent said earnestly to Nogales, just before they passed through the door, "I haven't said all I want to say about saving the Rancho de Paz for me, Nogales, but you'll get that money back. If we could only find that missing gold—"

"We'll find it, Ethan," Nogales said confidently. "I've got a hunch luck's going to start coming your way right soon. Forget that money for now." He grinned suddenly, "I can't talk business when a good supper is waiting!"

THE following morning, Rod Peters, accompanied by Nogales, Caliper and Steve, rode into Ramrod Ridge to establish his deputy-sheriff's headquarters. The four men moved about the almost deserted town, examining various empty buildings. Finally, Peters found a stout two-room shack which suited him.

"That back room could even be made into a jail," he pointed out. "Meanwhile, I'll have to get this place fixed up and a sign hung out."

The men worked until noon cleaning out the place with brooms which they had procured from Crawford's store. Steve had gone to make the purchase and came back with the report that Crawford hadn't been anywhere in sight; the bartender, Tony, had waited on him.

Peters surveyed his office with pride. "Not bad," he announced. "A mite of paint might help, but that can be taken care of later. Still, it wouldn't hurt to get a sign painted right now. Let's drift over to Crawford's store and see what sort of paint he keeps."

Crawford had emerged from his sleeping quarters back of the store by the time the four men entered. He glared at them, demanding, "Well, what do you want now?"

"Paint, a small brush, a hammer and nails. . . ." Peters went on and gave a list of his requirements. Crawford grunted in surprise and called his bartender to reach the various articles from shelves. Then the huge man stood moodily at his bar, his back to the customers.

"Nice pleasant place to deal," Nogales said loudly.

Crawford made no move to turn around.

"Say, Crawford," Caliper asked, "heard anything from your sleeping beauties yet?"

Still Crawford didn't turn, though he growled over one massive shoulder. "What business is it of yours?"

"I take it you haven't," Caliper said sweetly. Crawford didn't reply.

Peters and his companions were just leaving with the purchases when the sounds of horses were heard stopping before the store. A few moments later Deacon Trumbull, followed by his pals of the previous day, came pushing slowly through the doorway. The men's eyes were hollow and bloodshot; their clothing was badly wrinkled; they looked as if they'd been drunk for a week.

"Well," Caliper said. "Feel rested, boys?"

"They don't look so good," Nogales said. "I'm afraid they must've been drinking."

Peters and Steve started to laugh. The Deacon and his companions glared sourly, but they were too far gone to do anything more. One by one, they stumbled up to the bar and called feebly for drinks. Crawford cursed disgustedly.

Still laughing, Peters and his companions left the store and headed back toward the new deputy's office.

CHAPTER XVIII

FRIENDS OF MICKEY FINN

TWO hours later, the Deacon and his doped companions, seated near Crawford's big arm-chair, were still trying to figure out what happened. Crawford had given them a tongue-lashing they would long remember, but even the big man's profanity couldn't make them forget their aching heads.

"Cripes, Simon," the Deacon complained, "I don't know how it happened. I've told you all I know. Last thing I remember, we were drinking—"

"I know damn well you were drinking," Crawford cut in. "And you passed out. Swifty Catlett told me that much."

"What's Catlett know about that?" Ten-spot Nance asked. "He wasn't with us."

"Thank Gawd I wasn't," Catlett grinned. He was a rangy individual with pale blue eyes, at the present time wanted for murder in New Mexico. "You hombres sure were sleeping—"

Crawford interrupted, "You don't even know I sent Catlett to Moonstone to see what had happened to you. I've told you that already. Catlett rode there and back, and brought me word you were all sound asleep back of Waco Brown's saloon. He tried to wake you up then. Brown even helped pour water on you, but it didn't do any good."

The Deacon pressed one hand to his head and groaned. "Wine is a mocker," he quoted piously, "strong drink *is* raging—"

"Shut up," Crawford said suddenly. "I've got an idea.

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Turning from the dead man's cot, Nogales said: "I'm heading for Ramrod Ridge. There's a couple of skunks due for a gunning"

I just thought of something. . ." Deep wrinkles creased his forehead. Abruptly he snapped his fingers. "I've got it!" he said. "Deacon, I've watched you stow away a heap of drink in my time, but I never yet knew you to get blotto. I want the truth now; how much did you fellers drink in Brown's place yesterday?"

"We only had two-three rounds," the Deacon replied promptly. "That's why I don't understand it."

"I do," Crawford told him. "Waco Brown Mickey Finn'd you!"

"I see it all now. That Scott hombre outguessed us. He figured you might be waiting when he came through Moonstone with that cash money. I'm betting he sneaked into town, when you didn't see him, and got Brown to put those drops in your drinks."

A low growl rose from the men. Several of them got to their feet, bringing out their guns. Ten-spot Nance said, "I'm figuring to go across the street and wipe out them hombres. They're still over there in that new deputy's office—"

"Sit down!" Crawford thundered, and the men hurriedly obeyed. Crawford went on, "Cripes! Nogales Scott and his pals aren't fools. Don't you think they've figured as far ahead as we have? You start slinging lead with them and you'll pull Peters into the argument. Either we get jammed up, or we kill him.

"If we kill him, there'll be an investigation down here. We don't want that. Nope, you fellers just leave things to me. Let me think up a way to handle this. When I give the word, we'll act. Until then, just sit tight."

Furlow muttered, "I got a score to settle with that Waco Brown. I'll—"

"You'll sit tight until I tell you to move," Crawford growled.

After a time a few of the men drifted to the bar for drinks. Down at the far end Furlow was engaged in a low-voiced conversation with Ten-spot Nance. Nance listened closely. After a time he nodded his head. "We'd catch hell if the boss found out," he reminded Furlow.

"Not if we finished the job clean," Furlow said earnestly. "And you and me could do it. We wouldn't need to say a word to a soul until after it was done. Then, I'm betting Crawford would be mighty pleased."

SHORTLY after midnight, two riders pushed their ponies across the desert sands to Moonstone. A couple of lamps still burned in Waco Brown's saloon, but by this time the last section hand had rolled drowsily into his bunk, and such Mexicans and Cahuilla Indians as were still awake were in their homes.

The two riders swung their ponies wide to approach Brown's place from the rear. They dismounted beneath the limbs of a large mesquite tree, and dropped reins. Then, moving with careful stealth, they began to close in on the saloon building.

Brown stood yawning behind his bar, as he counted the day's receipts. A lamp burned on the back bar behind him. Another swung from the ceiling. Brown finished counting his cash, scooped it into a small canvas sack and locked it inside a wooden drawer beneath the bar. Turning to the oil-lamp behind him, he puffed out the flame and then started around the end of the long counter to extinguish the lamp swinging from the ceiling and lock the front doors of the building. He had taken only two steps when a noise at the doorway caused him to swing back. Ten-spot Nance was just entering.

Brown gazed steadily at the man a minute, then said: "Oh, it's you, eh? What do you want?"

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"A drink," Nance said harshly. He came up to the bar and rested one foot on the bar-rail. His right hand dropped to the holstered gun at his side.

Brown said, "Rye, Bourbon or beer?" in a level voice.

"Rye—and hurry up," Nance growled.

Brown nodded coolly and reached below his bar. His hand again came into view holding a six-shooter instead of the expected bottle. Nance stiffened and commenced, "What the hell you—"

"Hold it," Brown said coldly. "Don't try to draw on me. Now, what's eating you?"

"You put knockout drops in our drinks."

A smile crossed Brown's face. "Yes, I did," he admitted. "I figured you had something like that coming. Didn't like your introduction to Mr. Mickey Finn, eh?"

Nance snarled something, and Brown said, "Take it easy, Nance. I don't take that from any man."

At that moment, Hedge Furlow softly pushed open the door leading to Brown's back room. Brown's eyes, intent on Nance, didn't see the newcomer.

Furlow's right hand lifted, then exploded abruptly into a mushroom of orange flame. Brown swayed against the bar, caught himself and lifted his gun, fired once, missed as he started to fall. Again Furlow's gun roared. Nance leaped on top of the bar and poured a killing fire into the sagging man.

Brown's hand caught at the back bar, pulling it down on top of him. The crash of glass and bottles mingled with the thunder of forty-fives as Nance and Furlow kept on firing at the man below them.

Suddenly, their hammers were falling on empty shells. The room was thick with powder smoke. The man on the floor back of the bar was silent. Some place in town a voice was raised in shrill alarm.

"Come on," Nance spoke quickly. "We've got to get out of here. Move fast, damn it!"

Turning they ran swiftly through the rear of the building, climbed into saddles and jabbed savage spurs against their ponies' hides. By the time the first of the aroused townspeople arrived at the saloon, only a steady soft drumming across the desert sands told the direction the murderers had taken.

THE news was brought to Nogales about three-thirty in the morning by a young Indian riding the pinto horse that Nogales had borrowed the previous day. A cluster of men on the Rancho de Paz gallery surrounded the man while he told the story in broken English. Nogales' face was grim.

"Can you make it out?" Caliper asked.

Nogales said, steady-voiced, "Waco Brown has been shot. I don't know who did it, or how bad he's injured, but he sent this Cahuilla to get me. I'll be riding. Doc"—to Doctor Stebbings who stood shivering in the chill night air—"you'll come with me." It was a statement rather than a question.

"Certainly," Stebbings replied. "I've already asked Ethan to have a man saddle up for us. I'll get dressed and get my bag."

Caliper, Steve and Rod Peters, who was staying at the Rancho de Paz until he could get a cot for his office, all offered to go, but Nogales vetoed that. "No use of more than just Doc and me making the ride. This Injun says the fellers that did the shooting left town in this direction. Maybe you could do more by working in Ramrod Ridge, come morning. You might learn something."

"We won't wait until morning," Peters said. "I'm figuring to ride in now and rout out Crawford and the rest of his gang. They're due to answer some questions."

Five minutes later Nogales and Doc Stebbings were riding hard across the desert. They swung wide of Ramrod Ridge, taking a short cut that led through desert willow, mesquite and catclaw. By the time they were once more in open desert country the sky was growing pink in the east.

The sun was just lifting above the horizon as they pounded their foam-flecked ponies into Moonstone. Dismounting before the open doorway of Waco's saloon, they stepped inside. The oil lamp swinging from the ceiling had long since burned out, but a faint odor of oily, charred wick still lingered in the air together with the scent of burned gunpowder.

A half a dozen men stood at the bar, talking in hushed tones, none of them drinking. Back of the bar a splintered shelf and a litter of whisky-smelling glasses and bottles hid the dark stain that had seeped into the floor boards.

Nogales looked at the men at the bar. "Where is he?" he demanded.

"You Nogales Scott—the feller Waco asked for?" The boss of the section hands had stepped forward.

"I'm Scott," Nogales said tersely. "This is Doc Stebbings."

"I sort of took charge here," the section boss explained. "There wasn't much I could do, though. We got Waco into bed. He asked for you and then went unconscious. It was me sent that Injun to Rancho de Paz. Waco ain't come to since. He's in that back room."

NOGALES and the doctor pushed into the back room, where Waco Brown lay motionless, his breathing harsh and broken. All the blood seemed drained from his rugged face.

An Indian woman sat near his cot, placing wet cloths on the wounded man's forehead. She looked up and started to rise as the two men entered. Stebbings spoke to her in a mixture of Cahuilla and English: "Don't go; I may need you." He drew up a chair and opened his bag, after throwing back the blankets that covered Brown's body. After a time he swore softly.

Nogales asked, "What's the matter?"

Stebbings snapped. "I'm damned if I know what's keeping this man alive. He should have been dead long ago. I reckon whoever shot him figured he'd die instanter."

"You mean there isn't any hope?"

"I tell you," Stebbings said irritatedly, "he should be dead now. His body's riddled with lead. Whoever did this sure aimed to make a complete job of things."

"Look, Doc," Nogales said tensely, "you've got to pull him through."

"Dammit, man!" Stebbings said impatiently. "I can't do the impossible. There isn't a chance to save him. The best I can hope for is to bring him to consciousness before he dies, so we can learn who did this. Now get out of here, will you? I can't work when you're always asking questions. This job demands concentration."

Nogales walked grim-faced back to the barroom. He questioned the men there, then passed out to the street. For a time he moved around Moonstone, talking to everyone he could find who had heard the shots the previous night. By the time he returned to the saloon, his information covered only two brief facts: After the shots had been heard, two riders were heard leaving town. Already, hoofprints had been found heading in the direction of Ramrod Ridge.

In the back room Stebbings was still working over the unconscious man. He glanced up as Nogales paused in the doorway. "No news," Stebbings said briefly. "I'll let you know if anything happens."

Nogales went back to the barroom. The men there eyed him questioningly. Nogales shook his head, then went around the bar and found an unbroken bottle of liquor and some glasses. "I reckon we all need a drink," he said.

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The section boss and the other men nodded assent. The section boss added, "We've been feeling that way, but we sort of hated to help ourselves to Waco's liquor."

An hour passed, then two hours. The next time Nogales entered the back room, Doc Stebbings was seated quietly in a chair, puffing on a briar pipe. He didn't take his gaze from the dying man's face as he said, "I don't know if he'll regain consciousness, Nogales. He's sinking rapidly now. I've done all I can."

So Nogales waited there beside Waco Brown's cot; and it was only a few minutes later when Doc Stebbings, bending over the dying man, said softly: "He can't last more than a minute or so more. Feel his pulse."

Nogales' fingers sought Brown's wrist. Then he looked up, frowning. "I can't feel any pulse," he said.

Stebbings said shortly, "Now you know what I mean."

At that instant, Waco Brown's eyes fluttered open. His gaze rested on Nogales' face. "Hi-yuh, pard," he said feebly. "Looks like they got me, eh? Glad you got . . . here . . ."

"Waco," Nogales whispered, "tell me who did it. Do you know?"

"Cripes, yes. Two of . . . 'em. Ten-spot Nance . . . came at me . . . from the front. Furlow came in . . . rear way. I never . . . had a chance . . ."

"I'm squaring that, Waco," Nogales spoke swiftly. "But now you rest easy. Doc Stebbings here will—"

"Don't run risks . . . my account . . ." Brown's eyes closed. Nogales' gripped the man's cold hand and felt a feeble answering pressure. And then Waco Brown was dead.

Nogales rose to his feet. "Gone," he said briefly.

Stebbings nodded. "Damned if I know what kept him alive this long."

"Maybe I do," Nogales said level-voiced, "but I reckon it's something neither you nor I understand complete. I guess it just wasn't in the cards for Waco to die without letting us know who did it."

He thrust one hand into his pants pocket and drew out a roll of bills which he thrust on Doc Stebbings. "Do me a favor. Go to San Rivedino and make funeral arrangements. Waco had folks back in Texas and we'll send the body there. I'll give you the address later."

"Sure, sure," Stebbings frowned. "But what are you doing to do?"

"I'm heading for Ramrod Ridge pronto," Nogales said. "There's a couple of skunks there due for a gunning."

"Now, wait a minute, Nogales," Stebbings caught at Nogales' arm. "Don't you rush off half-cocked. We've got a deputy at Ramrod Ridge, remember. He can't make arrests if you insist on taking the law into your own hands."

"I'm not forgetting that," Nogales said grimly. "This is one time when there aren't going to be any arrests. Nance and Furlow don't deserve that much chance. I'm gunning for the sidewinders myself!"

CHAPTER XIX

RATTLERS' REST

IT WASN'T quite noon when Nogales rode into Ramrod Ridge. There wasn't a soul in sight along the single street; at this hour everyone was staying within doors, out of reach of the broiling midday sun. A few ponies stood limp and droopheaded before Crawford's store.

Farther along the street, on the opposite side, a brand-new sign proclaimed one of the buildings to be the office of the deputy sheriff. Here too stood three saddled ponies, but they were in the shade at that point.

Nogales drew his pony to a walk. His eyes narrowed. Should he go first to the deputy's office and tell what he had learned? He decided against that. "Nope," he muttered, "Peters would want to arrest Nance and Furlow. I'd have to back him in carrying out the law. Reckon I'd better go direct to Crawford's place. If those rattlers aren't there, I'll be surprised."

Nogales pulled his pony to a halt and dismounted. There was no one on the store porch, but from inside came the clinking of glasses and the sound of loud voices.

Nogales stepped lightly up the steps, crossed the porch and pushed his way inside. Within the store he hesitated but a moment to accustom his eyes to the light, after the brilliant glare of outdoors. Men were strung along the bar; Crawford was in his big arm-chair. At the table beside the chair sat Deacon Trumbull and Limpy Bristol, talking low-voiced to Crawford.

Nogales' keen gaze flashed quickly along the line of men at the bar and picked out Nance and Hedge Furlow near the far end. Without removing his eyes from the pair, Nogales started directly toward them, his arms swinging easily at his sides.

By this time, Crawford had spied Nogales and sensed danger. The big man heaved himself out of his chair, took two quick steps and barred Nogales' passage.

"Where do you think you're heading, Scott?" he growled.

Tall as he was, Nogales had to look up to meet Crawford's eyes. "I'm looking for the murderers of Waco Brown," Nogales snapped.

By this time the men at the bar had swung around to see Nogales. Nance and Furlow backed away a trifle, hands going to gunbutts. Crawford, standing in front of Nogales, obstructed Nogales' view of the action.

"You won't find those murderers here," Crawford rumbled. "Cripes A'mighty! Do you always have to come here when there's been trouble? Like as not somebody in Moonstone shot Brown."

"I know better," Nogales said coldly. "Out of the way, Crawford. I've got a job to do."

"Not so fast, not so fast." Crawford lifted one huge arm to bar Nogales' advance. "Must be you ain't talked to Deputy Peters."

Nogales hesitated. "What's Rod Peters got to do with this?"

Crawford swore. "He had plenty to do with it. Didn't he get me out of my bed early this morning and start asking questions—him and that pal of yours and that Mex? They went all through the town, asking questions. Everyone of my men were in their blankets—"

"That don't go down, Crawford," Nogales cut in. "Out of my way." His eyes were dangerous.

"Hold on, Scott!" Crawford placed one huge paw against Nogales' chest and tried to force him back.

Nogales swore, swiftly sidestepped, whipped his right foot around behind Crawford's right knee and gave the big man a sudden push. Crawford was already half off-balance; the push sent him falling back. He struck the floor with a heavy jar.

Nogales strode on until he stood a few yards from Ten-spot Nance and Hedge Furlow. The two gazed at him a second, then their eyes dropped. Other men at the bar commenced to scatter out of the way.

"You two—Nance, Furlow—" Nogales' words cracked like shots, "it's a showdown. Go for your guns!"

FURLOW backed another step. He was white as death. He didn't say anything. Nance put out one protesting hand. "We didn't have anything to do with Brown's killing," he said. "You got us wrong, Scott—"

"Liar!" Nogales snapped. "Brown didn't die right off like you figured. He lived long enough to name you two. Now, you dirty skunks, draw!"

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Nogales waited, tense. Neither man made a move toward his holster. They backed another step and started to spread out, each trying to divert Nogales' attention from himself. Behind him, Nogales heard Crawford cursing as the big man heaved himself up from the floor.

Nogales threw away caution. He lifted both hands high in the air. "Now will you jerk your irons? I'm giving you this chance. It's your last one!"

It was the chance Nance had been waiting for. His right hand swooped to holster. Nogales' hand flashed down, came up. A lance-like stream of white fire darted from the muzzle. Nance screamed and went down, clawing at his breast as he fell, his gun, even as he pulled trigger, falling from his hand. Nogales heard the bullet thud into the bar-front, as he whirled to face Furlow.

Furlow had already fired two shots, both of which had missed. He was still trying to steady his shaking aim, when Nogales' next bullet took him in the middle. Furlow groaned, swayed a moment. Then his body jack-knifed and he pitched to the floor, still clutching the weapon.

Powdersmoke swirled through the big room. There were excited yells. Limpy Bristol had whipped out his six-shooter and was covering Nogales, waiting for the expected order from Crawford who was approaching from behind. Crawford's huge right hand fell on Nogales' shoulder, whirling him around.

"You claiming those two did it—" he commenced.

From the doorway came an interruption. "Stick 'em up, you scuts. We've got you covered!"

Caliper, Rod Peters and Steve were advancing into the room, drawn guns in their hands.

"Up with 'em!" Peters snapped. "You, Bristol, put that gun away and move mighty cautious. Quick now!"

Crawford had thrown a quick glance over his shoulder at the newcomers, then turned his attention back to Nogales. "What right you got coming in here and—"

"I had a score to even up," Nogales said quietly. He twisted away from Crawford and approached his friends. "Thanks, gents. You arrived about the right time, I reckon."

"We heard Crawford shouting and came on the run," Caliper said. "Then, just as we reached the door, the shooting broke out."

"There won't be any more shooting for a spell," Crawford spoke heavily. "You hombres can put your guns away. I want to get to the bottom of this. Don't any man make to lift his gun. All right, Peters, call your men off."

NOGALES reloaded his forty-five and shoved the gun back in holster. The room quieted down. The men holstered their guns. Crawford sank ponderously back in his chair. "You, Deacon," he ordered, "go see if there's any life left in Nance and Furlow. I'd like to get at the truth of this business. I got a suspicion maybe Scott was right."

The Deacon rose and crossed the floor, kneeling first at Furlow's side. Instantly he arose, saying, "Furlow's passed to his reward, whatever it is." He stooped by the motionless form of Nance for a moment, then called for whiskey. Tony, the barkeep brought him a glass.

A few drops of the liquor were forced between Nance's lips. The others crowded near, but no one except the Deacon could catch the dying man's low-voiced reply.

Finally the Deacon let Nance's head fall back. "And that's the end of Nance," the Deacon said, adding: "They that take the sword shall perish by the sword."

"Cut that out," Crawford roared. "Did those two do it, or didn't they?"

The Deacon came back to his chair. "They did." He nodded. "Nance and Furlow killed Brown last night, then hurried back here and turned in. They—"

Crawford faced Nogales and his friends. "I don't expect you to believe me," he said, "but those two acted against my orders. They were all for wiping out Brown yesterday. I said no. Oh, we figured out what had happened, Scott. That knockout-drops stunt wasn't funny."

"I wasn't trusting your gang any, Crawford," Nogales said coldly. "I figured that was better than crossing guns with 'em."

"You and me will tangle yet, Scott," Crawford growled.

"You'll keep the peace, that's what you'll do," Rod Peters snapped.

"I'll do my share of keeping the peace," Crawford said. "Peters, I figure it's your duty to arrest Scott for the murder of Ten-spot Nance and Hedge Furlow."

"Murder?" Peters said. "Are you crazy, Crawford? The guns of both men are out, both fired their weapons. You call that murder? To me it's a clear case of self-defense, so there's no need of arrest."

"Dammit!" Crawford roared. "Scott taunted 'em into drawing."

"Take my advice and let matters drop," Peters told him. "And while we're on the subject of obeying the law, yesterday I gave orders that every man here without visible means of support had better make tracks out of Ramrod Ridge. I meant that. I haven't noticed any lessening of the population so far. Maybe I will have to make some arrests."

"Not in here, you won't," Crawford replied, and a sly smile creased his fat features. "Every man here is on my payroll, in one capacity or another. Mostly, they make trips buying cattle for me. Some of 'em wait on the store when I'm not here."

"I get it," Peters nodded. "You probably just put 'em on your payroll last night, so I couldn't run 'em out."

Crawford smiled mockingly. "Cripes, no! These fellers have worked for me for years—and I defy you to prove otherwise, Peters."

"Anyway," Nogales put in, "we've finally made Crawford admit he has a gang. That's something he'd never do before. From now on, any skullduggery that breaks out—well, Crawford, you'll be held responsible. If we can't tie your hands one way, we'll do it another. And don't think we're avoiding a scrap. We're just waiting for one. The sooner you get tough, the better we'll like it."

Crawford opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it. Finally he said wildly, "I've told you fellers a hundred times all I want is to be let alone to run my business peaceful. I don't want trouble. Anybody that knows me well, knows that too. Nope, Peters—Scott—you can't push me into fight with your talk of getting tough. Any trouble that breaks from now on, it'll be of your making. All I ask is peace."

"I wish we could believe that," Nogales said.

Peters said, "We'll give you plenty of opportunity to prove what you've said, Crawford."

"I mean it," Crawford insisted earnestly. "What say we have a drink all around?"

Nogales shook his head. "Me, I'm not thirsty right now."

CHAPTER XX

THUNDER COMING

A MONTH passed, the days slipping by in undisturbed tranquillity. Nogales and Caliper were growing restless; both felt that this was the moment before thunder, and they waited impatiently to see where Simon Crawford would strike next—as they felt certain he would.

The weeks of rest had worked wonders for Fred Vincent. By this time he was up and around, though Doc Stebbins

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had not yet judged him strong enough to do any riding. Now that he was in clean clothing, with his hair trimmed and his pale face shaven, he bore little resemblance to the "wild man" who had roamed the hills only a few weeks before.

Nogales, Caliper, Steve, Stebbings and the three Vincents were seated on the long gallery of the ranch house, one day, enjoying Polly's mint juleps. Below on the desert flats the days were hotter than ever, but in the shade of the gallery roof life was pleasant.

"No, Fred," Stebbings was saying, "you'll have to take it easy for a spell. You went through an ordeal that would have killed most men. We can't take chances of a relapse."

Signs of that ordeal were still present. Fred Vincent's face was lined and haggard, and at times his blue eyes took on a vacant look. There were huge blank spots in his memory, though bit by bit details of the fateful night of his running fight returned to him.

"I know, Doc," Fred replied earnestly, "but I've a hunch that if I could just fork a horse into Quithatz Canyon, I might remember what happened to that gold. I can recollect herding that pack mule ahead of me, into the canyon—then things go hazy. Maybe I fainted from my wounds; I don't know.

"I remember one slug slicing skin from my neck; another ripped a furrow across my shoulder. But there were days that consisted of just one fainting spell after another. I'd come to in a different place than I had been—"

"There's old scars from those wounds," Stebbings broke in. "There's one scar on your head that looks like it come from a fall."

Fred frowned. "Seems like I remember climbing up above Quithatz Falls, but I'm not sure. And then, some place along the line, maybe I slipped and fell. It's all like a bad dream. I remember things up to a certain point, then they vanish.

"I know there were days when I fainted several times Maybe more than one day passed while I was unconscious. I don't know. Those days I didn't even remember where I was, let alone who I was. I remember once looking in a pool and seeing my hair was white. That struck me funny at the time—"

"Suffering that will turn a man's hair white," Nogales said, "must be kind of tough to talk about."

Doc Stebbings said, "Talking will do Fred good now."

Fred went on, "I dug up roots and ate them. Once I came on a cache of piñon nuts hidden by some animal. I stole food from Indian villages; I trapped ground squirrels and rabbits. Somehow, I never thought of shooting them, though I'd kept hold of my six-shooter right along.

"I've no idea how many miles I've traveled through these mountains. I only knew, those days, I was deathly afraid of humans." He turned to Nogales with a wan smile. "You say I attacked Tim Church, Nance and Jack Schmidt that day you found me. I wonder why? Were they three of the men who attacked me that night? Did I remember them, or what?

"Maybe I instinctively recognized enemies. That's an animal's way and I was living right close to the animals those days. Sometimes in my wanderings I'd approach a settlement but I always got away as fast as possible. I was afraid of people.

"I remember seeing some men tracking me one day. I kept just ahead of them. They never did see anything but my tracks, or brief glimpses far off. Oh, I certainly reverted to the primitive. Small wonder I can't remember what became of that gold."

"We'll find it one of these days," Caliper said. "You'll remember it all of a sudden."

Here Doc Stebbings broke in on the conversation. "Time for your afternoon nap, Fred. Go in and stretch out. Every wink of sleep you can get is that much energy stored up."

Fred nodded, rose and stepped into the house.

AFTER he had left, Ethan said anxiously, "Doc, do you really think he ever will remember everything?"

Stebbings shrugged his shoulders. "I've got to tell you the truth, Ethan. I don't know. I do think there's a mighty good chance of it. Just the past week he's made a marvelous improvement. But the mind is a funny piece of equipment. It might take some great shock to clear Fred's mind."

"Shock, eh?" Caliper speculated aloud. "That night when Fred was held up and shot, there was a lot of shooting. Maybe if we could take him up to this Quithatz Canyon and shoot some guns, it might snap his memory back."

"It might, it might," Stebbings conceded, "but I'd be afraid to risk it. It might have the opposite effect of plunging his mind back into darkness again."

"Ridair comeeng," Steve announced.

Ethan Vincent rose and gazed, off across the tops of the trees in his fig orchard to the winding road that led to the Rancho de Paz. "Looks like Rod Peters," he announced.

"Coming fast?" Caliper asked.

Nogales grinned. "Probably no faster than he ever rides to get here, but it always seems to me he doesn't waste much time. What'll you bet, he's either coming to see Polly or—"

"Why should he come to see me?" Polly asked, her cheeks crimsoning. "He often has news of San Rivedino, too. Now that Sheriff Burger sends a man to Ramrod Ridge once a week to see if Rod needs anything, we hear about happenings in the outside world."

"I'm surprised that Burger showed that much initiative," Stebbings commented. "I wonder what came over him."

Nogales grinned. "He's probably still afraid I'll report him to the governor."

BY THE time Rod Peters arrived and ascended to the gallery, Polly had fixed a julep for him. "Just what the doctor ordered." Rod laughed, dropping into a chair. He took a long sip of the drink, blissfully closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the chair. "I'd be plumb happy if I could have one of these every day of my life," he murmured.

"That same drink, every day?" Nogales asked.

"I wouldn't want any of it changed," Rod said, opening his eyes again. "Not even—" He stopped suddenly, his face growing red.

"Sounds like a proposal, Polly," Nogales chuckled.

Polly looked flustered, and Peters tried to explain just what he had meant to say, but it didn't work. Finally he stopped stammering and said boldly, "All right, it was a proposal. What do you say, Polly?"

"No," Polly said promptly. "When I receive a proposal, I don't want an audience on hand."

"Meaning," Nogales said, "that if at first you don't succeed—"

"Suck eggs," Caliper cut in.

They all laughed, and a few minutes later Polly entered the house to see how supper was coming along. Ethan Vincent said, "Anything new happening, Rod?"

Peters sobered. "Yes, there is. Something I don't like."

Nogales said, "What's up? Trouble in town?"

Peters shook his head. "Not yet. Everything is peaceful there as far as I can see. Crawford and the rest of his gang pretend to be friendly. There's nothing I can take offense to, though I know they'd all, everyone of 'em, like to put a slug in my back.

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"It's this way. I had my weekly word from Sheriff Burger today, asking if everything was all right and if there was anything I needed to just pass the word to his messenger. But he added a few lines in his note that I didn't like."

"What about?" Caliper asked.

Peters said, "Burger says there's three gunfighters hanging around San Rivedino. They've just come from New Mexico where they played a part in that TIX—Rafter-H range war, sometime back. Burger heard one of them say one night in a saloon that they had an appointment to meet Simon Crawford on business."

"T'hell you say!" Nogales exclaimed.

Peters nodded. "I don't like it either. To top that off, Crawford went to San Rivedino yesterday. Just got back this afternoon. He's cooking up something or I'm a liar."

"You say Crawford went to San Rivedino?" Caliper asked. "I didn't think that big hulk ever moved out of Ramrod Ridge. It must take a mighty powerful horse to carry that load."

"He drives in, in a buckboard," Peters explained. "Yes, I understand he goes to San Rivedino once a month to order a bill of supplies which are brought down later, mule freight."

"I'd sure like to get a look at the buckboard," Caliper said. "It must be plenty strong."

"I wonder," Nogales said slowly, "if Crawford is importing gunmen."

"That's the way it looked to me," Peters said.

"Did Burger know who they were?" Nogales asked.

"He got their names," Peters nodded. "Wait a minute." He drew an envelope from his pocket and consulted the note that was enclosed. Then he looked at Nogales, "Their names are Nevada Blake, Jim Muttershaw and Squint Merrick. Know any of 'em?"

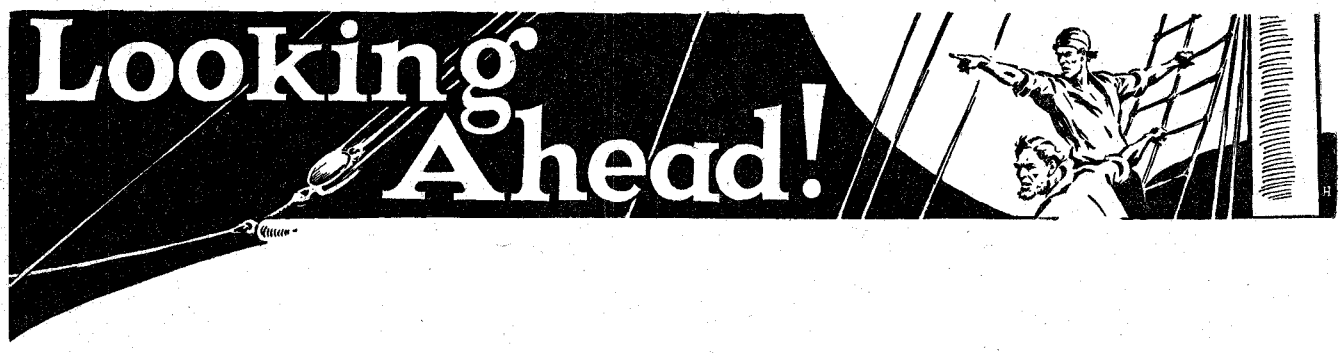
He looked questioningly at Nogales.

"Blake and Merrick are strangers. I had a scrap with Muttershaw once, back in Oklahoma." Nogales looked thoughtful. "His slug put me in the hospital for six months. He's plenty fast with his irons. I managed to wing one arm, but he got away with the horse we had the argument about. It was my horse. I was just a kid, those days, but I've always hoped to meet up with him again. He owes me a horse."

"Maybe this is your time to collect," Caliper said.

Nogales laughed briefly. "Maybe I'd be better off without the horse." He repeated, "Muttershaw's plenty fast with his irons."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



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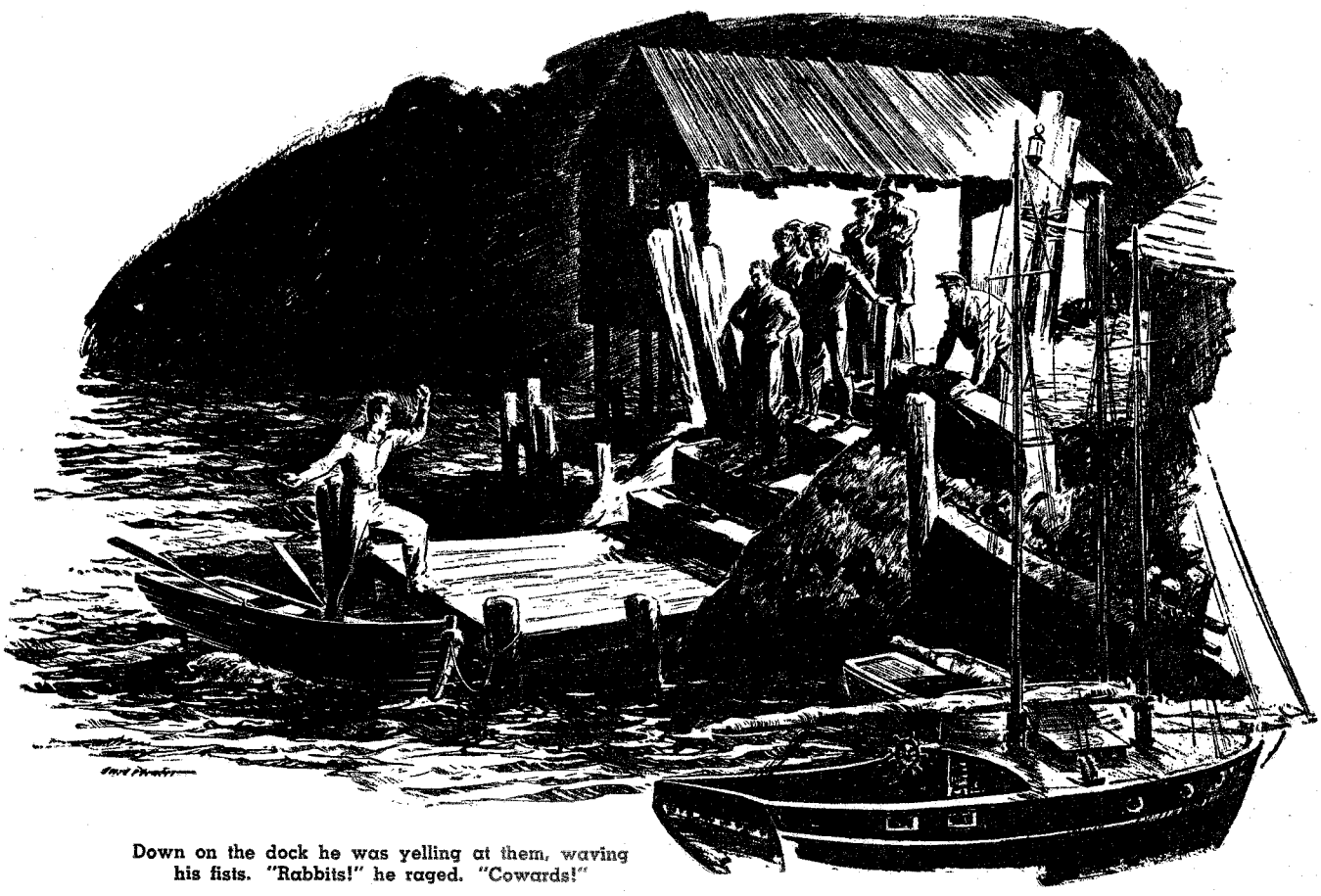

Down on the dock he was yelling at them, waving his fists. "Rabbits!" he raged. "Cowards!"

To the Last Ditch

They were both doomed—the village and the man. And the last-ditch battle to save the one made life possible for the other

By Bruce Hutchinson

AS SOON as I saw Roger get off the bus and stroll down toward the wharf I guessed what would happen, but I was in my boat, fifty feet from shore, and I couldn't do anything.

Young Jock Beecher was just stepping out of his boat when he caught sight of Roger, swinging down the gangplank with a yellow suitcase in his hand. Jock looked up at him for a moment and laid his fishing rod carefully on the wharf. Stolid, wooden-faced young Jock was as tall as Roger and his woolly Cowichan sweater made him look twice as broad.

Deliberately he crossed the wharf, his hands dangling. If Jock hadn't been around somebody else would have done the job the same way.

Jock said something that I couldn't hear. Roger laughed and came on, but his foot had hardly touched the wharf when Jock's fist caught him on the chin and he crumpled backward on the gangplank, his arms sprawled out through the railings.

I jumped out of my boat and ran across to him. He was lying with his eyes shut, his mouth open and his long, bony face was dead white—all the whiter for the tangle of black hair above it. I tried to help him up. Jock just stood there, looking down at him stupidly. "I didn't think. . ."

"Never mind," I said. "Help me get him up."

He was heavy to lift and still he didn't open his eyes when we got him sitting up. I looked around, wondering what to do. It was none of my business, really, but Roger and I had been friends once and we were aliens here, both of us, among these people.

By this time some of the other boats had come off the Bay. Old Major Beeston clumped across the wharf in his ridiculous Life Guard boots and khaki shorts. "What's the blighter come back for?"

Mary Weir and her father watched from the other side of the wharf without a word and Crazy Carr stopped cleaning a salmon and grinned stupidly, with his knife in one hand and the gutted fish dangling from the other.

Then Dr. Archibald clambered out of his boat. "What's all this? What's happened, damn it?" He squatted down and began to feel Roger's head with his short, blunt fingers, muttering all the while. "Seems all right. Funny thing, this. Must be in bad shape." He peered at Roger over his glasses and began to twist his sharp little goat's beard.

"I didn't think he'd go down like that," Jock began again, but the doctor's Scottish wife thrust him aside and stood over us now like a stark stone monument, her hands folded across her stomach. "Peely-wally," she grunted, her face as rough and hard as granite. "Always he was peely-wally, that Roger Black."

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ROGER opened his eyes and gradually they focused on me. He tried to grin. "Hello, Jim. I'm back."

We dragged him to his feet and he shook himself like a big dog, his black hair tumbling about his face. The old Indian, Johnny Louie, paddled his dugout around under the gangplank and picked Roger's felt hat out of the water and handed it to me, his two yellow teeth showing. I stuffed the hat on Roger's head and the water ran down his gaunt cheeks in trickles. Everybody stood there in a circle, staring at him, saying nothing. No one at Quinitan had reason to do anything else.

"The welcoming committee, I presume," Roger said, swaying.

"Come on," I said and picked up his yellow suitcase. With his arm around my shoulder, we lurched up the gangplank and across the road to my little office.

I made him lie down on my torn leather couch and found a bottle. The place was empty because old Hank, my only printer, had got himself gently plastered as usual after our mean little weekly paper was out.

Roger took the drink, gulped it down suddenly and held out the glass for more. I poured him another stiff one. Now, when I had time to think about it, I began to notice the change in him.

He could hardly be over thirty, but he looked ten years older. Not so much from the little streaks of gray at the temples or the new lines in his cheeks, not the worried, setter-dog look. That was familiar enough. No, it was his eyes. I knew that look all right. I'm an old fellow now and I'd been living for a long time among lost men.

He gulped the second drink and rubbed his chin where Jock's fist had landed.

"You're lucky," I said, "that only one of 'em reached you. Everybody on the Bay is planning to sock you as soon as you show your face."

Roger mumbled and held out his glass again.

"What did you expect?" I've been waiting about five years to make this speech. "You come here from the States ten years back and you're a mighty sick boy, and these folks are nice to you. Sure they're all crazy and blind, but they're nice to you. And you go away and become a great international journalist and you write a book of recollections. And you smear these folks' private lives all over the world. You make 'em out a collection of circus freaks, you make this place a burlesque of England. And now, by God, you have the nerve to come back here and wonder why they don't fall on your neck."

He didn't answer me, but got up stiffly and stood looking out the window, the rough line of his face, the jagged nose and thrusting chin, silhouetted against the light. There had been once in that boy's face a kind of fire, a flame that had taken him to the top. Too fast. Now only the ashes were left.

FROM here you could see the green sweep of the Bay and the river flats at the top of it, and the torn cliff of Mesatchie Mountain on the other side. Some of the early Springs were jumping out there, a white flash in the sunlight, and a dash of spray as their sleek bodies hit the water with a sharp slap like an oar.

No place along the whole coast of British Columbia has quite the same feeling as the Bay on an August evening, when a fine blue haze dissolves everything into a kind of soft dream, and the salmon run is on. Pure magic. That, I suppose, is what held us all here.

Roger swept his hand toward the Bay. "Like the salmon, Jam. Like the salmon I come back to the Bay. By unerring instinct in the mysterious cycle of nature." He pushed back his wild hair and held out his glass again, but I ignored it.

"What," I said, "has happened to you?"

"Lots of things, Jim. Lots of funny things." And that was all I ever did find out about it.

A rowboat had started out from the wharf and I knew by the blue sweater that it was Mary at the oars. Her father, Colonel Weir, sat bolt upright in the stern in his rough tweeds.

"You see," I said. "There she goes. You liked her pretty well yourself once. Mary Weir, twenty-eight years old—soon begin to lose her looks. Not a nickel in the family. And she would have married Jock and all the Beecher money if it hadn't been for that great book of yours."

"I call it a merciful deliverance," Roger said solemnly.

"Well, you can take full credit for it. When they read it, all that stuff about Jock and the other fellow, what's-his-name, fighting over her out there on a log in the Bay and near drowning—after you'd scattered that tale all over the face of the earth in your best seller, those kids hardly spoke to each other again. They're human, see, they've got feelings. But you wouldn't understand that. And telling about old Weir pawning his medals and Mrs. Archibald's young brother getting hanged."

"True, wasn't it?" Roger said.

"True, yeah. But the public could have struggled along somehow without it. Look, they had a little world here, a little bit of England, transplanted. It was cockeyed, screwy. Sure, but safe and snug and they believed in it. And you broke the legend. You tore the clothes off it and let the outside world look at it and giggle. All right, I forgave you because you were a kid and didn't know any better. But you're grown up now. Why come back here and rub it in?"

"Look at 'em," Roger said. "Look at 'em, Jim. And you want to know why I came back! I came back to see whether such people actually lived. I'd begun to think it had all been a dream. This phoney aristocracy with tea at four and the old school tie. This fake gentility with the smell of salmon. And I find I was right! It's true! They're really alive and speaking like men."

"You may fool yourself," I said, "but you don't fool me a nickel's worth. You came back because you were licked, because you had nowhere else to go. You came back, crawling on your belly, trying to start at the beginning again, trying to see if maybe you could find the guy named Roger Black, that you'd lost here. Well, you can't find him. He doesn't belong here any more. And tomorrow morning you catch the down-island bus before somebody else hits you."

"Maybe I would go," he said slowly, "if I had the bus fare."

It took me quite a while to absorb that. "Well," I said at last, "I'll lend you what you need." And after we'd killed the bottle I left him sprawled out on the couch, snoring.

WHEN I GOT to the office next morning Roger was gone, but in my typewriter was a note, neatly typed. *Dear Jim: Here's a society item for the paper. Roger Black, distinguished author and international heel, was welcomed enthusiastically this week to Quinitan by the local aristocracy, which owes so much to his brilliant pen. Mr. Black allows he is so overwhelmed by their hospitality that he will remain in these parts indefinitely, thus adding another note of culture to our unique local civilization.*

I figured, of course, it was a gag. That he'd gone. But a couple of days later Johnny Louie told me he'd seen Roger fishing down by Anvil Point. The next day Crazy Carr shuffled in to report that Roger came over regularly to the Olsens' place to milk their goat. Olsen wouldn't do it and his sick wife had got tired of having the goat

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brought in and set up on the bed beside her at milking time. I didn't believe that tale either. Carr was the younger brother of an earl, but as mad as a hatter, and with the face of a rabbit.

When Dr. Archibald rowed across the Bay to look at my chest again, he said it was true. Roger was back in the abandoned Finlayson house, five miles down the Bay, past the village, where'd he'd lived by himself in the old days.

"Nobody speaks to him. Naturally, the swine," the doctor grumbled. "Should be horse-whipped." The doctor listened carefully to my chest and scratched his stubbly beard. "The wife," he said, "took him a baking of bread and some other stuff and told him what she thought of him. Damn you, Jim, the chest's bad again. You've got to get up to the Dry Belt right away." He listened again. "I say, what's wrong with the fellow? What's happened to him?"

"Washed up," I said. "No job. No money. Flash in the pan. Running away from himself, that's all. Came back ashamed, maybe, trying to apologize, and we smack him on the jaw."

"Needed it," the doctor said.

He hadn't been gone half an hour before I saw Roger himself striding up from the wharf in his shirtsleeves.

He burst in without a word and thrust his hand into his hip pocket and hauled out a crumple of brown paper that might have been used to wrap meat in. He spread it, with elaborate care, on my desk and grinned at me. "I brought you a story for the paper, Jim."

I glanced at the pencil scrawl on the paper and found myself reading it. Since then, of course, that piece has been quoted all over the Continent. It was the best thing ever done on the Pacific salmon. Not scientifically, of course, but the story of it, the story of the fish coming home a thousand miles from the sea and finding its own stream and spawning and dying there. Roger had it all on his brown paper in a way to make you cry—the look of the fish glistening in the Bay, and the battered, half-dead carcases on the spawning sands, the seagulls gorging, and next year the little fish, newly hatched.

I told him not to be silly, to copy it out and sell it to one of the big magazines.

"Thanks," Roger said, "but I need groceries and I'll take five bucks for it."

I LOOKED again at his haggard face, tanned now and thinner; and I put my hand into my pocket and pulled out some money. It was ridiculous, of course, the whole thing was fantastic—Roger Black selling a piece for five dollars—but there was something irresistible about him, always had been. And as I handed him the money something still more absurd occurred to me and it was out before I had time to think.

"I'm sick," I said. "I've got to get away. Look, how'd you like to run the paper for a few weeks? If you insist on hanging around, you might as well eat."

He began to laugh and then, very solemnly: "Why sure, Jim. It's an honor, a post of trust, guarding the culture of Quinitan, informing the aristocracy, advocating truth and justice and the upper classes. . . ."

"Hold on," I said. "No monkey business. No working out your grudges."

We looked up to see Mary Weir in the doorway. She had come in as usual, on Thursday, with some local items for the paper. The few dollars I could pay her were all they had except the colonel's pitiful English army pension.

Mary stopped and at the sight of Roger she flushed deeply under her tan. She was a composite product, this girl, of England and Quinitan. Had the clean, beveled English features of her parents and that peculiar, fleeting springtime look you'll see over there, like an English April. Breeding, these folks would call it—I don't know. But she was still Quinitan, hadn't been anywhere else, and she was tanned by the sun and toughened by the wind of the Bay and as strong as a man.

They stood eyeing each other and Roger had the grace to redden a little, too. I remembered how he'd put her into his book, thinly disguised. Take her back to England, he'd written, put some good clothes on her and she'd look like a queen, but the only good clothes she ever had were sent out, second-hand, by her English relations, before the war. Oh, Roger had it all in the book—the rambling house on Halfmoon Bay, the girl's worn-out English mother, her father never drunk and never quite sober.

"Look, Mary," I said, feeling very foolish, "I'm sick again. I've got to go away. And," I finished lamely, "Roger is going to run the paper. I want you to help him."

She looked straight at Roger, her gray eyes steady. "What's he here for? To get material for another book about us? No thanks. He's so clever he can manage the paper all right by himself."

She turned to go, but I ran after her and stopped her at the bottom of the steps. "Please," I said. "If you don't, you'll make me think I've let you down, let everybody down. And he's all right now. He's cured."

She hesitated, those steady eyes searching mine. "Well, all right, Jim. If it will help you to get well."

Roger appeared in the doorway and grinned down at us. "The loyalty of the staff," he said, "is deeply appreciated."

I WENT UP to a ranch in Cariboo and it was two weeks before I got the first issue of the paper. Roger had dolled up my mangy front page to look like the New York *Times*. And Mary had a signed column on the inside paper, not too bad. These kids apparently were getting along.

It was the next issue that started the trouble. The front page was completely filled with a story about a dam on Quinitan River above the Rips. Certain interests—no names given—planned to generate electrical power there under an old, forgotten water license, and their dam would stop the salmon spawning in the river. That meant exterminating the whole run. In ten-point type Roger had an editorial demanding that the government at Victoria cancel the whole scheme.

The next issue came along. Across the top of the first page was a headline an inch deep—*This Deal Smells*. My eyes staggered on through the type: Why dam the Quinitan when there were plenty of other power sites that wouldn't injure any salmon? What was behind the scheme? Who was going to make all the money? Who held the stock? And why was Mr. Cochrane, our representative in the Legislature, significantly silent when the Quinitan salmon run was threatened with extinction?

This was too much. Cochrane was only a ten-cent local politician, a cheap heeler, but he controlled enough of the miserable advertising around Quinitan to keep my little paper going, and it was all I had to live on.

I caught the next train to the coast, and when I stamped up the steps to the office at dusk I found Roger and Mary and my printer, old Hank Potts, with their heads together over a proof. They were laughing, but they stopped when they saw me, and Hank slunk off to the print shop.

I picked up the proof from the table. The big headline shouted: *Cochrane Puts on the Heat!* I read on, dizzily. Cochrane had canceled his own real estate advertising in the Quinitan *Gazette* because of its opposition to the power

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dam. He had threatened the *Gazette,* but the *Gazette* would not be silenced. Other merchants had withdrawn their advertising through pressure from Cochrane. Why was Cochrane trying to silence the *Gazette?* What had he to do with the dam? Who else was in it?

"Libel!" I said. "Criminal libel. No member of the legislature is allowed by law in a deal with the government. What proof have you got that Cochrane's in it?"

"Why did he try to stop us publishing the story?" Roger said.

"Not evidence," I said.

Mary looked at me, her eyes dancing. "Why, Jim, the whole thing's as plain as the nose on your face!"

"Listen, you two," I began. They were leaning across the table together, glaring at me. "This is Quinitan! This isn't a movie! This is just a little village, just a little paper. . . ."

I glanced wildly at the proof again, read further and began to understand. Roger had done a job on Quinitan.

In his story he'd stood the people of Quinitan up in the witness box and asked them what they were made of. Asked them what all their superior way of life, their breeding and background amounted to when the test came. Not a word out of Quinitan when the salmon were going to be exterminated. The salmon were doomed by a gang of promoters and a few cheap local politicians, "and Quinitan stands by in its tweeds, with a cup of tea in its hand, and fly hooks in its hat—gaping, bewildered and gutless."

I CRUMPLED the proof in my hand and turned on Roger. "I might have known! Making a monkey out of these folks again. Easy way to pay back that sock in the jaw. . . ."

"You're scared, Jim," Roger said. "You're scared like the rest of 'em. Everybody 'round here's scared." He pushed back his wild hair and started to walk up and down the little office. "Rabbits, the whole lot of you! I told the truth in that book! I was right then. A gang of two-bit grafters cracks the whip and they wilt. They let the salmon die, the great fish they worship! Just front, that's all, just breeding and manners and an Oxford accent!"

"Stop it!" Mary's cry was so sudden that Roger stopped in the middle of a step. "It's not true! You know it's not true! You've no right to say . . ."

I saw the tears coming and I put my arm around her and held her tight. "You'd better get out," I said to Roger.

"I'll get out," he said. "Sure I'll get out. I've had a bellyful of Quinitan." He picked up his coat and threw it over his shoulder and marched out the door and I could hear him raging and cursing still as he walked down the path.

Mary sat down in a chair and I handed her my handkerchief and she dabbed her eyes. After a while she said: "The trouble is, it's all true, Jim. You know it is. Everything he said about us. Oh, Jim, why are we such a mess?"

"Just because a mad man comes in here," I sputtered. "Just because he says— What could we do about the dam anyway, all alone? This little paper?"

"Alone? Wait." She went over to my desk and in the drawer she found a bundle of clippings and thrust them at me. The thing was amazing. The big papers in Vancouver and Victoria and even in Seattle had taken up the dam story. They had pictures of Roger and pieces written by him—the international journalist who had turned up in the wilderness fighting for a few salmon. And he'd written the story of the salmon, their pilgrimage and sure return, as he'd written it on the brown paper that day—written the story so well that no editor could pass it up, and his name had turned it into news.

I looked at Mary again. "Where's he going now?"

"How would I know? He can go anywhere he likes. He's had all kinds of jobs offered him—telegrams, letters, phone calls."

"I'll be back," I said, and I ran down the steps toward the wharf. I reached the gangplank just in time to hear the last of the oration. Roger was standing there, one foot in his battered boat, the other on the wharf, with the little dark, sullen knot of people around him.

"Quinitan!" he was shouting. "This little bit of England, demi-paradise! This land of noble exiles! This superior race of men who worship the great fish yonder!" He flung his arm out, pointing to the Bay and I could hear the salmon leaping there in the darkness, slapping down into the water again, hordes of them, wallowing in their last ecstasy before they rushed up the river to spawn and die.

"The great fish!" Roger shouted. "They come back here every year out of the ocean, unafraid, and they go up the river and they die! And you love 'em, don't you? You worship 'em, and they're your god, and they make life look as if it had some sense to it! That's it, isn't it? Yeah, they teach you how to die!"

I RECOGNIZED in this harangue part of that article written on the brown wrapping paper. It was coming out now in a crazy torrent.

"But you haven't got the guts to raise a finger to save 'em!" he shouted. "What's the use of your traditions? What's the use of the old school tie? I'm sick to death of the whole lot of you!"

He sat down suddenly in his boat, pushed off with a jerk and started to row fiercely down the Bay. Nobody said a word. They just stood there on the wharf, all of them, and watched him fade into the darkness.

Then I heard Mrs. Archibald's hoarse Scottish voice. "Mad! Stark mad! And peely-wally."

They caught sight of me on the gangplank and old Major Beeston clumped across to me in his incredible Life Guards boots. He was Major Buscomb in Roger's book, you remember, the man who hauled down the Union Jack on his lawn after the news of Munich.

"By God, Jim, it's time you got back!" he growled through his enormous red mustache. "That blighter's been using your paper to make a holy show of us again!"

Miss Pinhorn thrust her sharp spinster face at me through the dusk. "In all the other papers, too!" she squealed. "Headlines, big horrid headlines! Calling us a little bit of England! That sort of thing! And in war time, too!"

Miss Pinhorn had no reason to love Roger either. She'd been in his book with the coffin that she kept in her living room so that it would be ready when she died.

Jock Beecher, bulky and wooden in the twilight, didn't say anything. Neither did Colonel Weir, Mary's father. He stood apart, a fishing rod in his hand, huge and gaunt.

"Look," I said. "I'm sorry. I didn't intend the paper to be used—but you don't seem to understand what he was trying to do."

I stopped. It was no use. They couldn't be expected to understand what I had only guessed myself these last few minutes—that somehow the doom of the salmon had become mixed up in Roger's mind with his own ruin. His attempt to save them was, in some fantastic fashion, an attempt to save himself. And he had failed.

Mrs. Archibald was still standing at the edge of the wharf, peering out into the darkness. Suddenly her voice boomed out. "He's mad, but he's right! That peely-wally Roger Black is right for once. And we've got to stop it. We've got to stop that dam."

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She cupped her hands and bellowed across the water: "Come back here, Roger Black! Come back, ye loon! We're going to see Mr. Cochrane!"

Then she turned and started grimly for the gangplank. I got out of her way and she marched up to the shore. The others looked at each other, and, without a word, began to follow her. The strange procession moved up the shore road, that stark Scottish woman in the lead, her husband hurrying along beside her like a terrier, and Major Beeston clumping at the rear in his preposterous boots.

I WAITED on the wharf, wondering if Roger would turn back and in a minute or two I heard the clank of his oarlocks coming nearer. He loomed out of the darkness and I grabbed the bow of his boat. He jumped out and we ran up the gangplank. "Worms turned, eh?" Roger panted. "They won't turn far. Cochrane'll put it all over 'em. No guts."

We ran on. When we got to Cochrane's house on the hill the crowd was clustered around the steps. Roger and I stopped at the gate and no one noticed us.

Cochrane stood in the doorway, in his shirt sleeves, silhouetted against the light. He had long white hair, a face like a preacher and a soft preaching voice.

"—knew nothing about it," he was saying as we came up. "But in any case, we can't stand in the way of progress—"

"There's plenty of rivers for power, without killing the salmon!" Mrs. Archibald boomed. "And you could have stopped it, Mr. Cochrane, if ye'd wanted to."

The little group muttered sullenly at this and Cochrane held up his hand for silence, as if he were addressing a public meeting. But Mrs. Archibald went right on: "You had something to do with it all right, Mr. Cochrane. Your dirty finger's in it somewhere."

"That's it!" cried Crazy Carr. "That's it exactly!"

"Damn it, tell the truth, man!" Major Beeston grumbled from behind Mrs. Archibald and Miss Pinhorn, bobbing up and down like a bird, squealed out: "You nasty, cheap politician, Mr. Cochrane!" But from the back of the crowd I heard the cockney voice of Henry Hodges, the grocer.

"But, like Mr. Cochrane says, we can't stop progress, you know."

"You can bet Hodges is in the deal somewhere," Roger whispered to me. "Bought up."

"My friends, my friends," Cochrane was saying in the doorway. The man talked like a sermon. "This is a very serious statement for Mrs. Archibald to make, unfair and unwarranted. It is, in fact, a slanderous statement and I could proceed in the courts against her. Be careful, m'am, what you say when you can't prove it. I tell you I know nothing of this dam. I had nothing to do with it."

Mrs. Archibald's arm shot out and pointed a bony finger at him. "But you could stop it by talking to the government, Mr. Cochrane!"

I saw Dr. Archibald pluck her arm. "It's no use, Martha. He won't do anything."

The crowd fell silent. This little world of Quinitan was utterly bewildered by the whole business, the threat of the dam, the loss of their fish. Something incredible, unbelieveable—that the fish could disappear, as if nature itself had faltered—and Quinitan was no match for a slick manipulator like Cochrane.

Mrs. Archibald looked around at the others helplessly.

"What did I tell you?" Roger grunted. "No guts to 'em. And I'll bet more than Hodges are bought up. Why, one good man could—here, let me talk to Cochrane!"

I clapped my hand over his mouth. "Shut up!" I said. I'd been watching Colonel Weir. He stood at the edge of the crowd, silent as always, and Mary was standing beside him. Something in his face had warned me of what was coming now.

"Look here!" the Colonel said and I saw Mary look up at him, startled.

"Look here, I—"

THE OLD MAN swallowed hard and his carved-oak face was twisted. But he pushed the others aside and strode up to the steps and looked straight at Cochrane. "You lie, Cochrane. You knew all about it. You told me the shares were to pay for running the power lines across my land. Now I see—you wanted to keep me quiet."

"What did I tell you?" Roger whispered hoarsely. "Bought up. The old school tie bought up."

Colonel Weir turned and faced us. "The fact is Cochrane gave me shares in the power company—me and several others. I didn't realize then about the salmon and all. When I read in the papers, I tried to give the shares back but he threatened me. I should have spoken before. A poor show, I'm afraid. Sorry. That's all."

He walked down the path, looking straight ahead and the crowd parted to let him pass. As he strode off, Crazy Carr said the first sensible thing I'd ever heard from him. "That took guts!"

"By heaven, it did," Roger muttered.

Mary ran after her father and put her arm around him and they walked down the shore road together.

The crowd was watching Cochrane. He stood there, rubbing his hands together and his sharp little eyes darted from one face to another. Suddenly Mrs. Archibald held up her gnarled fist and shook it at him.

"Ye scum! So ye were in it! Handing out bribes, eh? We could have ye in jail for this, Mr. Cochrane!"

"In jail!" Crazy Carr repeated and Major Beeston growled: "Dirty rotter." But it was Dr. Archibald who used his head.

"You get on the phone, Cochrane," the doctor said, and his voice was as calm as his bedside manner. "Get on the phone to Victoria and tell them we don't want this dam. They're your friends. They'll be in the mess, too, if this comes out. They'll take your advice. If they don't, we'll know what to do with you, my friend."

"But at this time of night!" Cochrane gasped. "Wait till morning."

"Right now," Dr. Archibald said coolly.

"All right, all right." Cochrane turned to the door, paused and sputtered: "I was thinking only of the best interests of the district. Can't stand in the way of progress. . . ." He went in, wringing his hands.

Everybody around the steps started to talk at once, and it was a minute or so before anyone noticed Roger and me by the gate. Mrs. Archibald saw us first and her Scottish voice blared out again. "There ye are, Roger Black, ye peely-wally! Come here in the light and let's look at ye!"

Roger tried to turn away, but I grabbed him by the arm and thrust him forward among the crowd. They stood around him, all at once silent.

"There's the young loon!" Mrs. Archibald chortled. "There's the laddie that did it! But for him, we wouldn't have known in time."

"That's right!" Crazy Carr said and thumped Roger on the back and stood there, giggling.

"Did a good job," Major Beeston grunted and tugged his flaming mustache uncertainly.

Roger looked at me wildly and pushed back his sprawling hair.

"Make a speech," I said. "Tell 'em what they are!

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Tell 'em about the old school tie! Tell 'em who's looney now!"

Roger opened his mouth but no words came. That didn't matter. I knew that the taut string inside him had snapped. Somehow, by this crazy business of the salmon, this ridiculous meeting on Cochrane's steps, the boy had come out of it and found himself after all these months. The people pressed about him and shyly began to shake his hand.

COCHRANE slumped into the light of the doorway again and, out of long practice, held up his hand for silence. He cleared his throat as if he were addressing a meeting.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I think I can assure the dam will not be built. The desires of the district have always been my law, as you know. When they were made known by me to the authorities—"

The rest of his words were lost in the shout from the crowd, and though he put up his hand for silence again, nobody paid any more attention to him. We all started to move away, down the road together. At the office Roger left me, without a word, and walked on. I knew all right where he was going.

It was the way it should be.

I switched on the lights and went into the print shop and looked at the type all set up in the form, ready for the press. *This Deal Smells* said the huge headline that would never be printed now, and below it the piece about the gutless people of Quinitan. I laughed a little at that and went into the office and poured myself a drink and sat thinking for a while. I had it all figured out by now. Roger could stay on here, take over the paper, write books, and I'd go fishing. He and Mary—well, I had no doubt about that either.

But just as I was going to lock the place up and go home, a car drove up to the door and I recognized the wheeze of Mary's old jalopy. In a moment Roger and Mary marched in together.

"You made a good speech to the crowd," I said, "but brief."

Roger grinned sheepishly for a moment and held out his hand.

"Thanks, Jim. And goodbye."

"Goodbye?"

"Yeah. We thought we'd drive down the Island tonight. We've just time to catch the morning boat."

"And a preacher," Mary said. "We're going to take one of those jobs." The girl put her arms around me and kissed me on the lips. "Goodbye, Jim. You've been swell."

Roger looked out the window at the Bay, where the moon was shimmering in a narrow white streak against the black shoulder of the mountain. You could hear the splash of the salmon from here. We stood, the three of us, looking at it for quite a while.

"Some day," Roger said, "we'll be back." He tried to laugh. "When we're old and tired like the salmon there."

After they'd gone I stood alone for a long time watching the Bay and listening to the splash of those strong, shining bodies. The salmon would be going up the river in a few days now with the first rain, surging up to lay their eggs in the sand as they'd always done since the beginning of time. There would be no dam to stop them.

I went into the print shop again and slowly pulled the type apart, the story about the folks of Quinitan that they would never read.

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did — Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do — well — there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County, I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be — all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 10, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1939, Frank B. Robinson.

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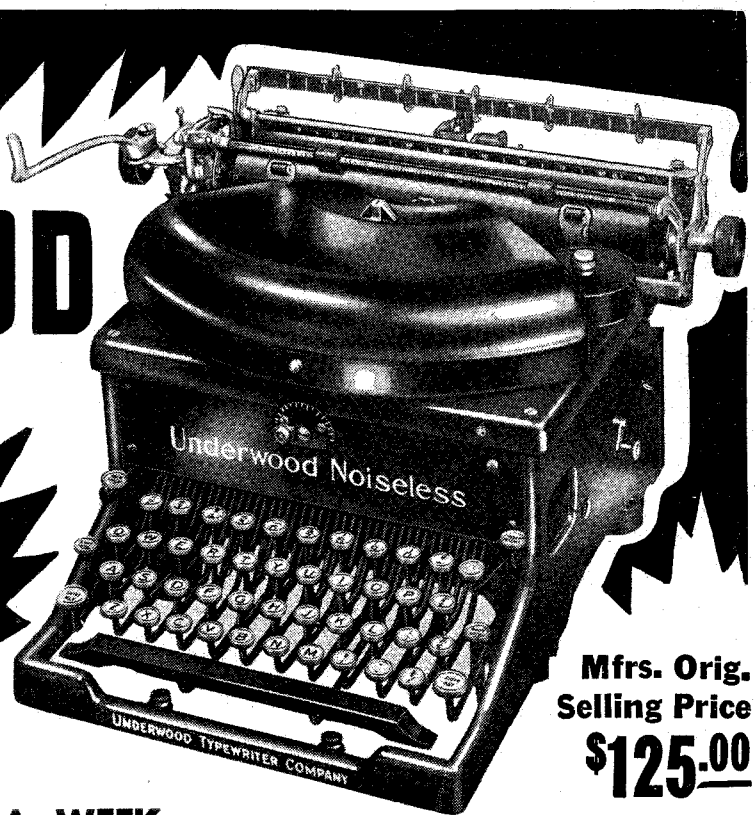

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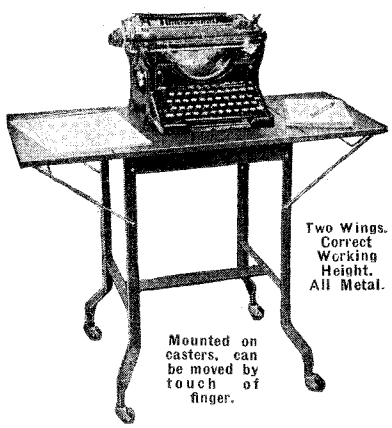

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